

## Written Answers.

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

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### Enterprise Policy

1. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if Enterprise Ireland plans to open an office in Rome, Italy. [41463/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Italy is currently the 5th largest export country in the Eurozone for Enterprise Ireland clients. The Milan office in Northern Italy which has a staff of six and is located in the industrial centre of Italy holds most opportunity within existing resources for Enterprise Ireland clients at the present time.

Therefore, there are currently no plans to open an office in Rome.

However, both my Department and Enterprise Ireland review resources and location of those resources on an ongoing basis to ensure that we are best positioned to support Irish enterprise abroad.

### Health and Safety

2. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of HSA investigations carried out to date in 2021, by county. [41515/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** From 01 January 2021 to 27 August 2021, the Health and Safety Authority conducted 5,346 proactive inspections and 703 investigations. The HSA can launch an investigation on foot of a complaint received or as a result of a fatal or non-fatal incident. As requested, the number of investigations by county is presented in the table below:

### Departmental Staff

3. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the current policy regarding the employment of persons with disabilities in his Department and in each State and semi-State body under the aegis of his Department; the disability quota of his Department at present; if there is an active campaign to increase the disability workforce from the current target of 3% to a minimum of 6% by 2024; if this quota has now been exceeded; if so, the details of same; if there has been an advertised competition in relation to the quota; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41591/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The disability quota of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment is set out below in tabular form. This data on the number and percentage of persons employed, both in the Department and in public bodies under its aegis, was compiled via an all-staff census as at 31st December 2020. This data is based on self-declaration of disability, by staff who disclosed having a disability.

Department	Total Number of employees	Number of employees with a disability	% of employees with a disability
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment	923	43	4.66

  

Name of public body	Total Number of employees	Number of employees with a disability	% of employees with a disability
Competition & Consumer Protection Commission	120	8	6.67
Enterprise Ireland	672	21	3.13
The Health and Safety Authority	190	13	6.84
IDA Ireland	359	21	5.85
InterTrade Ireland	57	3	5.26
NSAI	164	7	4.27
PIAB	80	6	7.50
*Science Foundation Ireland	89	3	3.37

\*Science Foundation Ireland, while not one of the Department agencies since the change of Government in 2020 was included in 2020 return and is shown in the table.

IAASA, one of our 8 agencies is not subject to the provisions of the Disability Acts as it is not a 'public body' as defined in the 2005 Act.

My Department's current policy regarding the employment of persons with disabilities is based on implementing the goals of the national policy. The 3% target is set out in Section 47 of the Disability Act 2005. The commitment to increase this target to 6% by 2024 is set out in the Programme for Government - Our Shared Future.

My Department as a public service employer has a legal obligation under the Disability Act 2005 to, insofar as practicable, take all reasonable measures to promote and support the employment of people with disabilities.

My Department has in place a dedicated Disability Liaison Officer who acts as a proactive contact for staff with disabilities, to assist and support them, and to assist in the implementation of best Human Resource practices in line with equality legislation. This role also includes the organisation of work placements in my Department for people with disabilities, specifically for the Willing and Mentoring (WAM) project. This project provides the opportunity for people with disabilities to gain experience in different workplaces through coaching and mentoring, as well as building the capacity of employers to integrate disability into the workplace. There are currently 4 graduates participating in work placements in my Department as part of the WAM Programme.

Also in place is a Disability Monitoring Committee, which serves to monitor the number of employees within my Department and Agencies who have declared a disability, ensure compliance with Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005, and share best practice to support those with disabilities in our workplaces. Through this Committee we have recently established an annual online and confidential census to more accurately measure our progress against national targets.

Further to this, we established a Disability Consultative Committee in 2018. The purpose of

the DCC is to provide a focus for disability inclusion in respect of the policy work, schemes and initiatives of the Department. Membership of the Group includes nominated representatives of disability groups along with Departmental officials and representatives from the Department's Offices and Agencies. The DCC also reviews my Department's actions under the 'Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with a Disability 2015-24'.

My Department also places a focus on learning and development opportunities that support people with disabilities in the workplace. This includes a recently launched Disability Awareness Training Programme, which seeks to increase the understanding of inclusion and diversity in the workplace. This training focuses on accommodating people with disabilities into the workforce and providing an understanding of inclusion in the workforce. Participants who successfully complete the course and obtain a pass mark obtain a 2-year certificate in Disability Awareness.

The Department has not advertised a competition in relation to the quota. My Department draws the majority of its required resources from the Public Appointments Service (PAS). The Public Appointments Service has a central role to play in recruiting diverse talent to take up public service employment opportunities. The PAS launched an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy in 2021 [PASEDI Strategy Document.pdf](#) ([publicjobs.ie](http://publicjobs.ie)) and my Department welcomes and fully supports this initiative.

## Weather Events

4. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the compensatory measures that will be put in place for businesses (details supplied) following weather events in February 2021. [41610/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** My Department's Humanitarian Flooding Relief Scheme may be invoked, following a Government Decision, to provide funding on the basis of confirmation received from the local authority and the National Emergency Coordination Group that relevant damage has occurred.

My Department has been in discussion with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage concerning the circumstances surrounding the flooding of a small number of business premises following a weather event in February 2021. As this event was considered a minor flooding incident, it is envisaged that on the invocation of the next emergency flooding scheme my Department will put in place the appropriate measures under which these businesses may apply.

## Work Permits

5. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his plans to reopen applications for work permits for dairy farm assistants in early 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41660/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** The employment permits system is designed to facilitate the entry of appropriately skilled non-EEA nationals to fill skills and/or labour shortages, however, this objective must be balanced by the need to ensure that there are no suitably qualified Irish/EEA nationals available to undertake the work and that the shortage is a genuine one.

The pilot quota-based scheme introduced in May 2018 following consideration of a detailed business case submitted by the sector, provided a quota of 150 general employment permits for the occupation of Dairy Farm Assistant. This pilot scheme has proved very successful for a range of employers in the sector and the quota of 150 employment permits is now exhausted.

In order to ensure that the employment permits system is responsive to changes in economic circumstances and labour market conditions, it is managed through the operation of the critical skills and the ineligible occupations lists which determine employments that are either in high demand or are ineligible for consideration for an employment permit. The lists are subject to twice yearly reviews which are evidence based and are guided by research undertaken by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) and the Skills and the Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) in SOLAS, a public consultation process, input from the relevant policy Departments and the Economic Migration Inter-Departmental Group, chaired by the Department. Account is also taken of contextual factors such as Brexit and, in the current context, COVID 19 and their impact on the labour market.

A further review of the occupation lists is underway and the closing date for submissions from stakeholders was 12th August. Any submission by the sector to this review will be considered and it is envisaged that it will be finalised in the early Autumn.

## **Enterprise Policy**

**6. Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the amount of funding through technology gateways received by each EU NUTS 2 and 3 regions in the State per year since 2016, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41688/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Enterprise Ireland, an agency of my Department, funds and supports the Technology Gateway Programme. The Technology Gateway Programme seeks to harness the innovation and technological expertise in the Institutes of Technology and Technological Universities for the benefit of Irish based industry on a regional and national basis.

Enterprise Ireland's Technology Gateway Programme has established a nationwide network of 16 industry-focused Gateways in the Institutes of Technology and Technological Universities. Gateways act as open access points for companies delivering near to market solutions across industry sectors such as ICT & Software, Bio Lifesciences & Food, and Precision Engineering and Materials. The Gateways act as a portal to the wider research infrastructure of personnel and specialised equipment within the network of Gateways.

MET, PEM and DESIGN+ were added to the network in 2016. The Centre for Renewable Energy at Dundalk Institute of Technology (CREDIT) is the newest Technology Gateway, launched in March 2021. The initial funding will allow CREDIT Technology Gateway to set up and staff the Gateway with a view to joining the other Gateways in re-applying for funding when a new programme is announced.

Technology Gateway funding is allocated over five-year programme streams and the total amount allocated to each Gateway, to date, is shown in the table below. Shannon ABC is a shared Gateway and is based in Munster Technological University (Tralee) and Limerick Institute of Technology. For the purpose of this analysis, Shannon ABC expenditure is recorded under the Mid-West region even though some expenditure relates to the South-West.

9 September 2021

-	Technology Gateway	Funding2013 – 2017	Funding2018 - 2022	Total Funding2013 - 2022
1	APT - Athlone	€1,765,451	€2,599,841	€4,365,292
2	CAPPA - Cork	€1,419,494	€1,633,999	€3,053,493
3	COMMAND - Athlone	€1,446,635	€1,748,500	€3,195,135
4	CREDIT - Dundalk		€430,400	€439,400
5	CREST - Dublin	€1,192,448	€1,826,500	€3,018,948
6	Design+ - Carlow	€305,017	€1,313,000	€1,618,017
7	IMAR - Kerry	€1,209,655	€1,436,002	€2,645,657
8	MET - Galway	€318,127	€1,416,545	€1,734,672
9	MiCRA - Dublin	€1,068,820	€1,300,000	€2,368,820
10	PEM - Sligo	€362,059	€1,404,780	€1,766,839
11	PMBRC - Waterford	€1,133,673	€1,365,000	€2,498,673
12	SEAM - Waterford	€1,840,492	€2,620,786	€4,461,278
13	Shannon ABC– Kerry/Limerick	€1,669,314	€1,752,784	€3,422,098
14	TEC - Cork	€1,920,783	€1,647,598	€3,568,381
15	TSSG - Waterford	€1,600,882	€1,820,000	€3,420,882
16	WiSAR - Letterkenny	€1,261,185	€1,390,791	€2,651,976

-	NUTS 2 funding (2013 – 2022)		Totals
IE04	Northern and Western		
	MET – Galway	€1,734,672	
	PEM – Sligo	€1,766,839	
	WiSAR – Letterkenny, Donegal	€2,651,976	
	Total		€6,153,487
IE05	Southern		
	TSSG - Waterford	€3,420,882	
	SEAM - Waterford	€4,461,278	
	PMBRC - Waterford	€2,498,673	
	Shannon ABC – Kerry/Limerick	€3,422,098	
	Design+ - Carlow	€1,618,017	
	IMAR - Kerry	€2,645,657	
	TEC - Cork	€3,568,381	
	CAPPA - Cork	€3,053,493	
	Total		€24,688,479
IE06	Eastern & Midland		
	CREST - Dublin	€3,018,948	
	MiCRA - Dublin	€2,368,820	
	CREDIT - Dundalk	€439,400	
	APT - Athlone	€4,365,292	
	COMMAND - Athlone	€3,195,135	
	Total		€13,387,595
	NUTS 2 Funding Total (2013 – 2022)		€44,229,561
	NUTS 3 Funding (2013 – 2022)		
IE041	Border		
	WiSAR – Letterkenny, Donegal	€2,651,976	
	PEM – Sligo	€1,766,839	
	Total		€4,418,815
IE042	West		
	MET – Galway	€1,734,672	€1,734,672
IE051	Mid-west		

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-	NUTS 2 funding (2013 – 2022)		Totals
	Shannon ABC – Kerry/Limerick	€3,422,098	€3,422,098
IE052	South-East		
	TSSG - Waterford	€3,420,882	
	SEAM - Waterford	€4,461,278	
	PMBRC - Waterford	€2,498,673	
	Design+ - Carlow	€1,618,017	
	Total		€11,998,850
IE053	South-West		
	IMAR - Kerry	€2,645,657	
	TEC - Cork	€3,568,381	
	CAPPA - Cork	€3,053,493	
	Total		€9,267,531
IE061	Dublin		
	CREST - Dublin	€3,018,948	
	MiCRA - Dublin	€2,368,820	
	Total		€5,387,768
IE062	Mid-East		
	CREDIT - Dundalk	€439,400	€439,400
IE063	Midlands		
	APT - Athlone	€4,365,292	
	COMMAND - Athlone	€3,195,135	
	Total		€7,560,427
	NUTS 3 Funding Total (2013 – 2022)		€44,229,561

### Company Registration

7. **Deputy Fergus O’Dowd** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the current length of time it is taking for documents to be scanned and uploaded on the CRO system; the reason for any delays; if further resources have been ringfenced for the CRO section in order to address any such delays in the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41723/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Robert Troy):** The majority of documents filed with the Companies Registration Office are uploaded online by presenters. In 2020, over 81% of all documents filed with CRO were filed online. Online filing has increased to 88% so far in 2021, largely due to the introduction of a new IT system in December 2020, which significantly increased the range of documents that can be filed electronically with the CRO. The new IT system is designed to provide improved and faster user experience for presenters and a fully paperless interaction with the CRO for certain transactions, including the most common ones carried out by companies such as the filing of annual returns and the changing of directors and their details. The introduction of a fully paperless system for these transactions provides certainty of delivery for companies and eliminates the need for CRO staff to scan and upload related paper documents.

The CRO receives, processes and registers over 170 form types, covering all aspects of the lifecycle of a company and provides regular updates of current processing times for the most frequently filed forms on the CRO website and via Twitter.

I understand that some forms and documents are still received by the CRO in paper format

and that there are no particular delays in scanning or uploading this material. I have been informed that, in general, such documents are input into the system by the CRO within 72 hours of receipt.

### **Departmental Expenditure**

8. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his Department or a State agency booked or paid for an event (details supplied); if so, the date the booking was made; the reason for the event and the payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41735/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Neither my Department or any agency within the remit of my Department were involved in arranging the event referred to.

### **Zero-hour Contracts**

9. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the action that can be taken in relation to carers on zero hour contracts (details supplied). [41736/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** Ireland’s comprehensive body of employment rights legislation protects all employees who are legally employed on an employer-employee basis. Employment rights legislation was strengthened by the commencement, on 4th March 2019, of the Employment (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2018.

The Act delivered on the Programme for Government commitment to address the challenges of the increased casualisation of work and to strengthen the regulation of precarious employment.

The Act of 2018 provides that:

employers must give to employees their core terms of employment within five days of starting work;

zero hours contracts are restricted to situations where the work is of a genuinely casual, emergency or short-term relief nature;

there are minimum payments for people when they are called into work, but sent home without work;

a ‘band of hours’ system has been introduced whereby an employee can request to be placed on a contract that better reflects the hours they have worked over a 12 month reference period;

Section 18 of the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 (OWTA) was amended to prohibit zero hour contracts except in the following circumstances:

- Where the work is of a casual nature;
- Where the work is done in emergency circumstances; or
- Short-term relief work to cover routine absences for the employer.

There are strong anti-penalisation provisions, including recourse to the Workplace Relations Commission, for employees who invoke their rights under this legislation.

In relation to sick pay, the Government is committed to introducing legislation to cover all employees and work is well underway in this regard. The Sick Leave Bill 2021 will be designed to take an incremental approach with the number of sick days to be paid to workers increasing gradually over a number of years. This is to give employers, particularly businesses who may have had to close or been negatively impacted due to Covid-19 restrictions, an opportunity to adjust to costs and the administrative burden. In line with statutory sick pay schemes throughout the European Union, the intention is that employers will cover the cost of an initial period where one of their employees is unable to work due to illness or injury. It is intended that the legislation will be in place by 2022.

### **Departmental Meetings**

10. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the meetings held by his Departmental officials from assistant principal level upwards with representatives of the food industry in relation to the issue of infant nutrition in Ireland from 2016 to date, including the issue of infant formula; the dates, attendees and matters that were discussed at each meeting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41842/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** No meetings were held by officials of the Department with representatives of the food industry in relation to the issue of infant nutrition in Ireland during the period in question.

### **Company Registration**

11. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he plans to defer the latest date for filing returns to the Companies Registration Office due to the difficulties businesses and accountants have had due to Covid-19 restrictions in which many of their staff are working remotely and also where response times from departments and State agencies are often delayed also affecting the ability of businesses and their accountants to access necessary information for returns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41859/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Robert Troy):** The Registrar of Companies is a statutory role and the Registrar has administrative independence in the exercise of this function.

Under company law, companies have an annual return date 9 months after the end of their financial year. They then have a further 56 days in which to complete their filing with the Companies Registration Office. As a consequence, annual returns are filed on an ongoing basis throughout the year. However, a significant number of companies have a financial year end of 31st December, a resulting annual return date (ARD) of 30th September the following year and a deadline of 25th November by which the filing of the annual return must be completed with the CRO.

Since March 2020, the Registrar of Companies has taken a number of decisions in relation to the filing of annual returns, in recognition of the additional challenges facing some companies and their professional advisers in meeting filing obligations during the Covid-19 period. These exceptional arrangements are at an end and normal timeframes now apply in relation to

filing.

The filing of annual returns has continued throughout the period of Covid-19 related disruption, with particularly heavy volumes in the run up to the filing deadlines last October and more recently at end May/early June. A new IT system was also introduced in December 2020, which includes a more streamlined online process for filing annual returns and eliminates the need to deliver hardcopy material to the CRO. I understand that over 155,000 annual returns have been filed with the CRO so far this year.

I understand that the Registrar of Companies is not planning any further extension of filing deadlines given the easing of Covid-19 restrictions, the ongoing level of successful filing and the importance of having an up-to-date Register for those stakeholders who regularly access company filings.

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

12. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if advice will be provided on a matter (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41878/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** The Government have provided a comprehensive package to help businesses during the pandemic, details of the supports can be found here: Government supports for COVID-19 impacted businesses - DETE ([enterprise.gov.ie](http://enterprise.gov.ie)). I would urge business owners to seek the supports outlined on my Department's website if they have not already done so.

In this instance, I would also suggest contact is made with their Local Enterprise Office (LEO) who can signpost them and advise them of supports that may be available for their particular type of business. Contact details for each of the LEOs can be found here: [Find your Local Enterprise Office](#)

### **Rights of People with Disabilities**

13. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his Department will address the situation in relation to the removal of seating in shopping centres in the context of Covid-19 which is a serious barrier to persons with a disability who need to rest while they shop; if he will restore seating for this group as a matter of urgency who have suffered a disproportionate limit on their independence during the Covid-19 emergency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41907/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** The National Standards Authority of Ireland (NSAI) guidance document 'COVID-19 Shopping Centre Recovery and Protection Guide' includes a provision for public seating for people with disabilities and the elderly under section 6.7.3, as follows;

*re moving seating areas (with exception of those for people with mobility or disability requirements). Where seating is retained for persons with disabilities and older people, this seating should be clearly marked a designated for these people.*

*Where appropriate, retailers should provide single portable seating outside their shops that are sign posted for "disabled/age friendly designated seating."*

The full guidelines can be found on [www.nsai.ie](http://www.nsai.ie).

### **Ministerial Appointments**

14. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the formal or informal roles held by a person (details supplied) with his Department or with any associated State agency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41909/21]

37. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of formal and informal roles held by a person (details supplied) in the name of his Department or associated agency in the lifetime of this Government; when they were appointed to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43035/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 14 and 37 together.

The person in question has not held any formal or informal roles with my Department or the agencies under its aegis.

### **Industrial Development**

15. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if the new solar farm (details supplied in Cork accessed funding through the IDA; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41927/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The solar farm at Dunderrow, Cork did not access funding through IDA Ireland for this initiative.

### **Work Permits**

16. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will provide information in relation to his Department's recent decision to allow non-EEA care assistants to work in hospitals and nursing homes but not in private homes; the reason home carers remain on the ineligible occupations list; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41940/21]

18. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his attention has been drawn to issues in recruitment within the homecare sector which is believed to have been worsened by the decision to not allow providers to recruit staff from outside the EEA; if he has taken steps to address the issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41967/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 16 and 18 together.

The State operates a managed employment permits system maximising the benefits of economic migration and minimising the risk of disrupting Ireland's labour market. The system is intended to act as a conduit for key skills which are required to develop enterprise in the State for the benefit of our economy, while simultaneously protecting the balance of the labour mar-

ket.

The system is managed through the operation of the Critical Skills and Ineligible Occupations Lists which determine employments that are either in high demand or are ineligible for an employment permit where there is a surplus of those skills in the domestic and EEA labour market.

In order to maintain the relevance of these lists of occupations to the needs of the economy and to ensure the employment permits system is aligned with current labour market intelligence, these lists undergo twice-yearly evidence-based reviews which are guided by research undertaken by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN), the Skills and the Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU), SOLAS and involves public/stakeholder consultation. Account is taken of education outputs, sectoral upskilling and training initiatives and known contextual factors such as Brexit and, in the current context, COVID-19 and their impact on the labour market. Consideration is also taken of the views of the Economic Migration Interdepartmental Group, chaired by the Department and of the relevant policy Departments, in this case the Department of Health.

Following completion of the most recent review, it was decided to remove the occupation of healthcare assistant (in hospital and residential care establishments) from the Ineligible Occupations List. The review did not recommend extending eligibility to care worker/home carers as the evidence suggests that other factors, such as the contracts of employment on offer and employment terms and conditions being offered are a factor in the recruitment challenges faced by the sector, rather than a demonstrable labour market shortage. The sector has also previously been advised that a more systematic and structured engagement with the Department of Social Protection needs to be demonstrated.

If a sector wishes to propose a change to the occupations lists, they need to submit a detailed evidence based business case to substantiate their request. A review is currently underway, with submissions received, including submissions from the Home Care sector, under consideration. It is expected that the review will be finalised by the end of September/early October.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

17. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the measures he is taking to promote or facilitate remote working for staff in his Department or bodies under the aegis of his Department; the costs this has generated in terms of the provision of laptops, desktop computers or contributions to wi-fi costs or phone-related expenses; the number of staff who have applied for permission to work from home on a permanent or hybrid-model basis (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41950/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** My Department and Offices are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is developing a central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service. This will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across the Civil Service. Once this framework is in place staff will be in a position to apply for blended working. From 20 September staff will return to the office on a phased basis. A formal blended working policy is anticipated to be in place Q1 2022.

Since the start of the pandemic, my Department has made significant efforts to facilitate remote working for the vast majority of staff (circa 950), and to invest in assisting staff to work safely and productively from home. The total cost of laptops and associated peripherals to facilitate this has amounted to €703,000.

These measures apply to staff in my Department and its Offices. Remote and Blended Working arrangements in the Agencies under the aegis of my Department are operational matters for the Agencies themselves.

*Question No. 18 answered with Question No. 16.*

## **Enterprise Policy**

19. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the supports that are available to disabled entrepreneurs. [42180/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** The Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) are the ‘first-stop-shop’ for advice and guidance, financial assistance and other supports for anyone intending to start or grow a business. In that regard, the LEOs provide a ‘signposting’ service in relation to all relevant State supports available through agencies such as Revenue, the Department of Social Protection, Education and Training Boards, the Credit Review Office and Microfinance Ireland.

The Local Enterprise Offices operate on an equal opportunities basis and offer their services to any entrepreneur, regardless of their situation, in a fair and even-handed manner and in compliance with Government policy and all legal requirements. In this regard, Local Enterprise Office grant supports are available to all entrepreneurs provided they meet the general eligibility criteria such as operating in manufacturing or internationally traded services and with up to 10 employees..

All entrepreneurs can avail of Local Enterprise Office training, mentoring and management development programmes. Furthermore, Local Enterprise Offices can provide additional support to disabled entrepreneurs such as one to one mentoring or sign language to assist with the completion of grant application forms or to complete training courses such as Start Your Own Business. Full detail on available programmes can be found on the Local Enterprise Office website at [www.localenterprise.ie/Discover-Business-Supports/](http://www.localenterprise.ie/Discover-Business-Supports/).

This year Enterprise Ireland established a Diversity and Inclusion Steering Group to oversee the development of the agency’s Diversity and Inclusion vision and strategy. A critical component of this strategy is specific to supporting entrepreneurship and self employment for people with a disability. The aim is to complete the development of the strategy in the months ahead.

As part of Enterprise Ireland’s wider strategy development, a specific ‘Balance & Inclusive Enterprise Development’ working group has been established. This group will present recommended strategic options to the Enterprise Ireland Senior Leadership regarding strategic options for the delivery of Enterprise Ireland’s 2030 ambition on ‘Balanced and Inclusive Enterprise Development’, and as part of the next Enterprise Ireland strategy which is currently being developed.

The Local Enterprise Office Centre of Excellence will implement any appropriate elements and recommendations of the EI Disability Strategy. Furthermore, there is ongoing work by the IT Team in the Centre of Excellence to improve the LEO website from a disability accessibility perspective.

## Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

20. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the supports that are available to businesses that missed the deadline for the small business assistance scheme for COVID; and if he will consider allowing businesses to apply for this important grant after the closing date. [42191/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** The Government recognises the sacrifices business owners, employees and their families have made over the past 18 months in order to protect their community from COVID-19. As you are aware, the Government put in place a comprehensive package to help businesses and workers during the pandemic. These business supports were unprecedented.

The Small Business Assistance Scheme for COVID (SBASC) has now closed and there are no plans for a further SBASC scheme as the economy reopens and restrictions are lifted. It is not possible at this stage to accept late applications.

However, the Business Resumption Support Scheme (BRSS) administered by the Revenue Commissioners is now accepting applications from eligible business. Applications under the scheme may be made between early September 2021 and 30 November 2021.

Further details of this scheme is available on [www.revenue.ie](http://www.revenue.ie).

The Governments comprehensive business support package includes low-cost loans, the deferral and warehousing of tax liabilities and the waiver of commercial rates. Details of the wide range of COVID-19 schemes are available on my Department's website at [enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/](http://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/).

I would also encourage business owners to talk to their Local Enterprises Offices who offer advice and guidance in relation to the supports available to businesses.

## Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

21. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of requests for appeals in respect of the restart grant plus scheme for Covid-19 when the closing date was abruptly introduced; the number of appeals and the estimated quantum value of the appeals by county together with the number of appeals and the quantum of amounts that were approved on appeal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42217/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** The Restart Grant scheme was launched in May 2020 and was live on all Local Authority websites. It was advertised extensively both nationally and locally as well as across social media. The Scheme was initially intended to provide grants in tandem with the phased re-opening of the economy as per the Government's Roadmap. As the Roadmap was accelerated, so too was the scheme available to all eligible businesses and sectors.

The numbers of applications nationally had begun to taper off as we considered introducing an expanded Restart Scheme with higher grant levels. As the Government decided to introduce the higher grant levels, to the benefit of a much larger group of businesses, it was decided to end the original scheme. The Restart Grant Plus Scheme was launched in August 2020, with increased minimum and maximum grants available to a larger cohort of businesses.

Businesses, for whichever reason, that were unable to apply for the original Restart Grant scheme were entitled to submit an appeal to their Local Authority. In this context it is important to note that for the purposes of the Restart Grant and Restart Grant Plus schemes, each Local Authority was the decision-making body and the appeals body, so individual appeals were directed in the first instance to their respective Local Authority, noting the circumstances/reasons for the particular appeal.

I can advise the Deputy that, of the total 123,380 applications for the Restart Schemes operated by the 31 Local Authorities on behalf of my Department, 108,634 applications were approved and paid. 14,746 were not approved. The funding provided to each Local Authority for the appeals is set out below by Local Authority area in tabular format, along with a breakdown by Local Authority area of the €633.2 million approved in grant assistance to eligible businesses.

RESTART GRANTS SCHEMES					
Local Authority	Total Number of Applications	Number of Applications Not Approved	Number of Applications Approved	Total Value of Appeals Funding€	Value of Total Applications Approved€
Carlow	1,467	109	1,358	€0	€7,493,149
Cavan	2,272	194	2,078	€16,722	€9,851,417
Clare	3,185	333	2,852	€332,285	€15,062,331
Cork City	6,458	1,126	5,332	€4,150,702	€36,951,412
Cork County	11,946	1,243	10,703	€0	€34,124,468
Donegal	4,599	207	4,392	€1,279,241	€24,298,505
Dublin City	15,038	2,755	12,283	€3,019,326	€98,022,805
Dun Laoghaire Rathdown	3,780	563	3,217	€723,941	€26,088,577
Fingal	4,646	595	4,051	€400,000	€30,091,628
Galway City	3,244	460	2,784	€1,000,000	€18,897,889
Galway County	4,178	745	3,433	€1,180,744	€17,016,277
Kerry	4,842	692	4,150	€500,000	€23,540,813
Kildare	4,171	476	3,695	€2,001,820	€25,448,466
Kilkenny	2,462	268	2,194	€0	€11,325,394
Laois	1,611	230	1,381	€0	€7,693,446
Leitrim	984	72	912	€0	€4,203,787
Limerick	5,034	517	4,517	€54,692	€26,576,902
Longford	1,407	71	1,336	€400,000	€6,196,951
Louth	3,611	559	3,052	€1,298,948	€18,281,163
Mayo	4,572	604	3,968	€477,033	€20,241,131
Meath	3,681	221	3,460	€562,413	€18,973,679
Monaghan	1,983	85	1,898	€0	€9,357,678
Offaly	1,955	162	1,793	€613,344	€9,167,835
Roscommon	1,779	64	1,715	€505,110	€8,242,244
Sligo	1,850	23	1,827	€566,816	€9,009,109
South Dublin	4,851	1,141	3,710	€500,000	€30,976,222
Tipperary	4,500	227	4,273	€0	€20,401,593
Waterford	3,106	278	2,828	€454,509	€15,779,672
Westmeath	2,441	143	2,298	€61,185	€11,483,918
Wexford	4,460	277	4,183	€1,532,492	€22,534,110
Wicklow	3,267	306	2,961	€591,793	€15,897,283
TOTAL	123,380	14,746	108,634	22,223,116	633,229,854

### Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

22. Deputy Pa Daly asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment

if he will report on previous and upcoming scheduled meetings with the play and leisure industry to discuss the need for ongoing business supports due to the Covid-19 pandemic and plans to reopen the sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42228/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** I and officials in my Department have continued to engage with various sectors throughout this pandemic to assess the optimal supports required. The Government have provided a comprehensive package to help businesses during the pandemic, details of the ongoing supports can be found here: Government supports for COVID-19 impacted businesses - DETE (enterprise.gov.ie).

A new Economic Recovery Plan was announced in June, with €4 billion of stimulus to fuel the economy and businesses to recover and rebuild. The Plan also outlined a number of changes to the current financial supports as public health restrictions unwind, assuring that the CRSS will remain in place for businesses that have to stay closed. The EWSS is being extended until the end of 2021, the commercial rates waiver will continue during the third quarter of this year for those availing of it, the 9% VAT rate was extended until the 1 September 2022, tax warehousing is being extended until the end of the year and will be interest free in 2022.

A new Business Resumption Support Scheme, administered by Revenue, has commenced this week for businesses with significantly reduced turnover as a result of public health restrictions, the details of which are available on the Revenue website.

As the Deputy is aware, the Government have agreed Ireland's plan for the next and final phase response to the COVID-19 pandemic COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting. During the period between 1 September and 22 October, the gradual approach to reopening will continue, you will note from this publication that indoor play centres may open from the 20th of September.

Subject to the continuation of this progress, we will enter a final phase on 22 October, which will see the majority of restrictions lifted and replaced by guidance and advice.

I would urge business owners to seek the supports outlined on my Department's website if they have not already done so.

### **Intellectual Property**

23. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he has a draft timetable for full preparations up to and including the necessary referendum on the European Unified Patent Court system which Ireland signed up to and is now expected to be operational in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42435/21]

24. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the status of the preparations to host an Irish local division of the Unified Patent Court; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42436/21]

25. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if there are plans in place to develop a strategy to market the Irish local division of the Unified Patent Court internationally to ensure it is successful and delivers on its full economic potential; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42437/21]

26. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he is considering making a bid to host the central division of the Unified Patent

Court system given that the UK's withdrawal from the agreement means that the central division court destined for London will have to find a new home (details supplied); if there have been discussions with the enterprise agencies on this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42438/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 23 to 26, inclusive, together.

To enter into force, the Agreement on a Unified Patent Court (UPCA) must be ratified by 13 Member States (MS) including the three largest contracting states (by number of European patents). Originally, these were France, Germany, and the UK. The UK, which had ratified in April 2018, announced in February 2020 following Brexit, that it would not be participating in the UPCA. This led to a revision of the three contracting states to France, Germany, and Italy. To date, 16 Member States have ratified the Agreement including France and Italy. Germany has yet to ratify the Agreement. In addition, with the withdrawal of the UK, two further MS have to ratify it before the Unified Patent Court can come into force.

Ireland would have to hold a successful referendum before ratifying the Agreement. A decision on the holding of a referendum on this issue will be kept under review in the context of the timing of the coming into force of the UPC. Consideration of issues in relation to the potential location of local and central divisions of the UPC in Ireland would have to await the outcome of any referendum.

*Question No. 24 answered with Question No. 23.*

*Question No. 25 answered with Question No. 23.*

*Question No. 26 answered with Question No. 23.*

### **Departmental Expenditure**

27. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he or his Department played any role in the procurement of ventilators from China at any point from 1 January 2020 to 1 January 2021. [42589/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** My Department did not procure medical equipment, including ventilators, between January 2020 and January 2021. However, during the earlier period of the Covid crisis, my Department did work with our enterprise agencies and the Health Service Executive (HSE) to support Government efforts to source increased supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE) and other medical equipment. IDA Ireland, in particular, worked closely with the HSE and Office of Government Procurement (OGP) in identifying overseas suppliers of urgently needed PPE and medical equipment.

### **Brexit Supports**

28. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment when the new Brexit impact loan scheme an important support for Irish businesses who are facing challenges arising from Brexit and Covid-19 will be open for applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42591/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varad-**

**kar):** The launch of the Brexit Impact Loan Scheme [BILS] is planned for mid-September. This will see the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland opening for eligibility applications and the first of the participating lenders making the scheme available, with further lenders to follow in the coming weeks.

This scheme is a successor to the Brexit Loan Scheme. It will make loans available to eligible Brexit-impacted businesses for longer terms, of up to six years, and provide for more competitive interest rates. The scheme will also allow some forms of refinancing, and, lending under the scheme can be used for investment purposes as well as for working capital.

This scheme has been developed in cooperation with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and will be available to eligible primary producers (businesses engaged in farming and fishing).

The scheme is operated by the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland through participating lenders and is underpinned by a guarantee through the European Guarantee Fund (EGF), which is being implemented by the European Investment Fund [EIF] on behalf of the European Commission.

I am conscious of the impact that Brexit has had on Irish businesses, on top of the changes brought about by the pandemic. The Brexit Impact Loan Scheme will make up to €330m available to eligible businesses as they navigate the dual impacts of the pandemic and the UK's withdrawal from the EU.

## **Business Regulation**

29. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the licensing and regulatory framework in place for the barbering trade; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42638/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** Regulations that apply to all businesses can be found on the *www.businessregulation.ie* Business Regulation portal. This portal provides assistance in identifying the main regulations which affect businesses and to provide links to relevant tools and contact points. For additional information on enforcement of any regulations relevant to this sector you may wish to contact my colleague the Minister for Health who has responsibility for the HSE and Environmental Health Officers.

## **Flexible Work Practices**

30. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the steps that being taken to facilitate remote working within his Department in particular to encourage remote working for those who live in the regions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42704/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Departments and Offices are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. The Department has work locations in Dublin, Sligo, Carlow, Kilkenny and Ennis. Staff in each of these locations were supported to work from home during the pandemic in line with Government Policy.

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is developing a central policy frame-

work for Blended Working in the Civil Service. This will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across the Civil Service.

Since the start of the pandemic, my Department has made significant efforts to facilitate remote working for staff, and to invest in assisting staff to work safely and productively from home.

My Department's Management Board also recognised that customary approaches for ensuring staff development, team effectiveness and manager engagement needed to be reconsidered to support successful blended working. In October 2020, the DETE Management Board approved the launch of the 'ConnEcTEd Teams' pilot programme with the aim of identifying and promoting behaviours that support effective remote/ blended working for teams. The programme targets five key areas:

1. Maintaining team/ organisation-wide connectedness and trust;
2. Ensuring effective and efficient information flows;
3. Enabling continued on-the-job training and coaching activities;
4. Facilitating remote collaboration and innovation; and
5. Supporting employee wellbeing.

The most significant element of the ConnEcTEd Teams initiative is our project involving pilot teams from seven Divisions across the Department, representative of all grades and locations. Each of the teams underwent a process to identify and implement actions that could positively impact their remote/blended team working behaviours. Senior leaders from across the Department also participated in facilitated sessions that focussed on building a shared understanding of the strategic opportunities and challenges presented by blended working for DETE. It identified the skills required to be effective leaders in a hybrid work environment.

Based on the insights gained from the programme, our HR team is preparing a report which will present a menu of actions for consideration by individuals, teams, people managers and leaders seeking to embed effective blended team working behaviours. The report will highlight areas where the Department can focus its efforts to support blended working at an organisation-wide level (e.g. orientation, people manager supports, network creation, virtual collaboration training). The ConnEcTEd Teams project report, when approved by the Department's Management Board, will be shared across the Civil and Public service with the intention that other organisations may learn from the process and insights uncovered.

In line with Government policy the Department has issued communications to staff and is convening planned information sessions to address questions and concerns that staff may have as we plan a phased return to the office from 20 September. The Department sees a phased return to the office, in all locations over the next three-six months, thus enabling staff a gradual return as measures are put in place during the pandemic to manage work/life commitments are recalibrated to meet the needs of the Department post pandemic.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

31. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Em-

ployment the way in which his Department and public bodies and agencies under his remit are accommodating requests for persons to work from home. [42754/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Departments and Offices are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is developing a central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service. This will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

Until such time as this framework is in place, and in line with Public Health guidance, my Department will support staff to return to the office commencing on the 20th September on a gradual and flexible basis. Communications have issued to staff and information sessions are planned to answer questions staff may and to provide support as staff return to the office.

These measures apply to staff in my Department and its Offices across five locations including Dublin, Carlow, Kilkenny, Sligo and Ennis. Remote and Blended Working arrangements in the Agencies under the aegis of my Department are operational matters for the Agencies themselves.

### **Intellectual Property**

32. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the steps he is taking to ensure that Covid-19 vaccine trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights waiver is addressed through the WTO TRIPS Agreement. [42776/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** Universal and equitable access to safe, effective and affordable vaccines, diagnostics and treatments is crucial in the global fight against COVID-19.

International Trade is a competence of the EU under the Treaties and in exercising that competence, the European Commission engages fully with the Member States, including Ireland, through a variety of Committees and Working Parties/Groups, including on Intellectual Property.

As regards the broad waiver proposed by a number of WTO Members, on 4 June, the EU submitted a proposal to the WTO General Council, which proposed that WTO Members could agree on a global trade initiative for equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines and therapeutics encompassing the three components of (i) trade facilitation and disciplines on export restrictions; (ii) concrete actions to expand production and ensure supply of vaccines at affordable prices to low and middle income countries during the pandemic and (iii) clarification and facilitation of TRIPS Agreement flexibilities relating to compulsory licences.

The EU has also submitted a Declaration to the TRIPS Council to assist the next phase of discussions with a view to trying to reach agreement with all Members of the WTO on how to achieve the shared goal of expanding production and facilitating equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines and therapeutics for all.

The EU continues to be committed to an open and comprehensive dialogue with all WTO members to explore how the multilateral rules-based trading system can best support universal and equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines and treatments, and to continue ramping up

production, to share COVID-19 vaccines and medicines more widely and faster and to ensure equitable access to these products for low and middle-income countries. The EU considers that the COVAX Facility, the international initiative to ensure global access to COVID vaccines, is the mechanism that is best placed to ensure that high-income countries finance the vaccines and support the developing countries to secure their share of global supply. Ireland has consistently championed collaborative responses to the pandemic, with a focus on ensuring that the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable are served by our collective effort. As a member of the global health community, Ireland continues to play an active role in ensuring fair and equitable access to vaccines for all. This includes supporting the World Health Organization (WHO), the Global Vaccine Alliance and the Global Fund, to develop, produce and equitably distribute effective technologies in the COVID-19 global response.

### Government Communications

33. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he has ever used his personal phones for Government business; and if so, if the personal phones have been hacked during his term of office. [42940/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I occasionally use my personal phone for Government business at times when my work phone is not charged or on my person. There is no indication that my personal phone has been hacked.

### Freedom of Information

34. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of freedom of information requests responded to by his Department in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; the number of responses that included documents related to text messages and other phone message communications such as messages sent through an application (details supplied) in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42962/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The number of Freedom of Information requests responded to by the Department in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021 are set out below in tabular format.

Year	Total FOI Requests made to the Department
2016	209
2017	298
2018	281
2019	258
2020	259
To date in 2021	239

While the Department maintains a publicly available FOI log, this log does not report on the format of records released under each FOI request nor is this information collated elsewhere. For this reason it is not possible to provide the requested information.

### Commissions of Investigation

35. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the cost of each commission of investigation under the remit of his Department over the preceding decade. [42991/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** There have been no commissions of investigation under the remit of my Department in the period in question.

### **Industrial Development**

36. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of properties owned by the IDA in Tipperary town; and the number of vacant IDA properties in Tipperary town. [43005/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** While IDA Ireland does not own any property in Tipperary Town, they actively market the IDA Business Park in Knockanrawley, Co. Tipperary, located approximately 1km South East of Tipperary Town Centre.

The IDA in recent years sold two sites to non-IDA clients to facilitate their business expansion and support and create employment in the area. The remaining lands in the IDA Business Park, Knockanrawley, Co Tipperary comprise c.2.04 hectares and offer good potential for development subject to planning permission. The Business Park is zoned 'IE' (Industrial & Economic) under the current Tipperary Town & Environs Development Plan. These lands are currently for sale on the open market.

IDA Ireland has also proactively engaged with the local authority in regard to promotion of County Tipperary as a location for investment. There are 143 IDA client companies in the Mid-West Region (Clare, Limerick and Tipperary), employing 24,169 people. The FDI performance in the region has been consistent over the past five years with employment among IDA clients increasing by 29%.

There are currently 12 companies located in County Tipperary employing 4,180 people, including Abbott Vascular, Amneal, Boston Scientific, Fiserv and Waystone. The region and county is well positioned to continue to attract new FDI investment and grow employment in existing companies and IDA Ireland will continue to collaborate with all stakeholders and parties in the Region to achieve this objective under the Regional Enterprise Action Plan.

*Question No. 37 answered with Question No. 14.*

### **Work Permits**

38. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his plans to reopen applications for work permits for dairy farm assistants in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43049/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** The employment permits system is designed to facilitate the entry of appropriately skilled non-EEA nationals to fill skills and/or labour shortages, however, this objective must be balanced by the need to ensure that there are no suitably qualified Irish/EEA nationals available to undertake the work and that the shortage is a genuine one.

The pilot quota-based scheme introduced in May 2018 following consideration of a detailed business case submitted by the sector, provided a quota of 150 general employment permits for the occupation of Dairy Farm Assistant. This pilot scheme has proved very successful for a range of employers in the sector and the quota of 150 employment permits is now exhausted.

In order to ensure that the employment permits system is responsive to changes in economic circumstances and labour market conditions, it is managed through the operation of the critical skills and the ineligible occupations lists which determine employments that are either in high demand or are ineligible for consideration for an employment permit. The lists are subject to twice yearly reviews which are evidence based and are guided by research undertaken by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) and the Skills and the Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) in SOLAS, a public consultation process, input from the relevant policy Departments and the Economic Migration Inter-Departmental Group, chaired by the Department. Account is also taken of contextual factors such as Brexit and, in the current context, COVID 19 and their impact on the labour market.

A further review of the occupation lists is underway and the closing date for submissions from stakeholders was 12th August. Any submission by the sector to this review will be considered and it is envisaged that it will be finalised in the early Autumn.

### **Government Communications**

39. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he and or his special advisers and or officials use or have used services (details supplied) to communicate in the past 18 months. [43069/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Neither I nor my special advisers have used the services in question for official business in the past 18 months.

With regard to the use of these services by officials in my Department, I am informed by the ICT unit that the Department does not support Slack which is a cloud based collaboration platform. However, some staff members may be accessing this without ICT support, as the website is not currently blocked. The Department provides alternatives to Slack which are supported. With regard to Signal, 22 staff members have downloaded the application to their Departmental phones.

### **Data Centres**

40. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps he is taking to assess the water and energy requirements for data centres; his views on the impact on water and energy provision in cities, towns and villages in which there is a data centre nearby; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41455/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department does not have any function in the assessment of water and energy requirements for specific data centre projects. This would be a matter for the individual data centre applicant and the relevant planning authority in their assessment of such applications, and the interaction between a prospective data centre and Irish Water and EirGrid. The Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) is Ireland's independent energy and water regulator. Under Section 34 of the Electricity Regulation Act 1999, the CRU has the power to issue directions to the system op-

erators. In June 2021, CRU published a proposed Direction to the System Operators related to Data Centre grid connection, for consultation. This included a number of options for managing data centre connection demand. A final decision will be issued by the Regulator in due course.

### **Departmental Staff**

41. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the current policy regarding the employment of persons with disabilities in his Department and in each State and semi-State body under the aegis of his Department; the disability quota of his Department at present; if there is an active campaign to increase the disability workforce from the current target of 3% to a minimum of 6% by 2024; if this quota has now been exceeded; if so, the details of same; if there has been an advertised competition in relation to the quota; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41592/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department uses the services of the Public Appointments Service (PAS) which is the centralised provider of recruitment, assessment and selection services for the Irish Public and Civil Service.

The current percentage of employees who have declared a disability under the definition in the Disability Act 2005 (bearing in mind that the declaration of a disability is voluntary), is 3.6%.

Under the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities for 2015 – 2024, the Government has committed to progressively increasing the statutory target for the employment of people with disabilities from 3% to a minimum of 6% in the public sector by 2024. The Department is continually working to ensure that it meets all commitments in this regard.

I have asked the bodies under the aegis of my Department to provide the information requested for their organisations directly to the Deputy.

### **Energy Conservation**

42. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps his Department is taking to ensure that social housing funded under section 38 of the Health Act 2004 can access energy efficient retrofitting schemes in the future. [41608/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** SEAI grant schemes will be a central element of the Government's approach to achieving our national retrofit targets. Some €221.5 million in capital funding has been provided this year for SEAI residential and community retrofit programmes. This represents an 82% increase on the 2020 allocation and is the largest amount ever for the schemes. This allocation has facilitated the expansion and improvement of existing SEAI grant schemes and the introduction of new initiatives. A further €65 million has been allocated to retrofit social housing administered by the Department of Housing.

Organisations that provide housing to vulnerable persons and are funded under the Health Act 2004 are eligible to participate in schemes under the national retrofitting programme. Both the Communities Energy Grant Scheme (previously known as the Better Energy Communities Scheme) and the National Home Retrofit Scheme provide funding to upgrade homes for private

owners, Approved Housing Bodies and Local Authorities. More details are available on the SEAI website. The recently published 'Housing For All' plan also includes a commitment to introduce a new energy efficiency retrofit scheme for Approved Housing Bodies in Q1 of next year.

In addition, the Public Sector Retrofit Partnership Pathfinder Programme provides capital funding for pathfinder retrofit projects aimed at testing building retrofit approaches and developing a model that can be replicated across the wider public sector. The SEAI / HSE element of this Programme has funded the establishment of Energy Bureaus across a number of regions and has delivered retrofits to over 50 HSE buildings. More details are available on the HSE Energy Bureaus at [www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/healthbusinessservices/national-health-sustainability-office/designing-the-built-environment/estates-energy-bureau/](http://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/healthbusinessservices/national-health-sustainability-office/designing-the-built-environment/estates-energy-bureau/).

### **Electricity Generation**

43. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when the microgeneration scheme will be opened for households to allow them to share excess energy to the national grid; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41737/21]

45. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when the scheme to allow microgenerators to sell up to 30% of excess electricity produced for export to the national grid will be in place; the price at which the electricity will be sold; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41899/21]

50. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to bring in a feed-in tariff for homes that produce their own energy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42114/21]

72. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the timescale for the introduction of the new micro-generation support scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42652/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**  
I propose to take Questions Nos. 43, 45, 50 and 72 together.

The Programme for Government commits to expanding and incentivising micro-generation to help households generate renewable electricity for their own use and to sell excess electricity back to the grid. Under the Climate Action Plan, a Micro-Generation working group, chaired by my Department, is developing an enabling framework for micro-generation which tackles existing barriers and establishes suitable supports within relevant market segments. My Department outlined proposals for a new Micro-generation Support Scheme (MSS) in a public consultation that closed on 18 February last. A summary report of the submissions received has been published on my Department's website. While the primary aim of a micro-generation scheme is to enable a household to meet its own electricity needs, it is intended that a suitable payment for excess electricity generated on site and exported to the grid will be available to all renewables self-consumers later this year, subject to regulatory arrangements, in line with transposition of Articles 21 and 22 of Directive (EU) 2018/2001 on the promotion of the use of energy from renewable sources. It is expected that the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) will publish a draft framework in the coming weeks which will outline the details, including eligibility criteria and timescales for introduction of the Clean Export Guarantee payment for exported renewable electricity. This framework will outline the approach to the rate of remuneration under the CEG, as determining such matters is the responsibility of the CRU. This

would give effect to the above-mentioned articles and allow for the commencement of export payments to micro- and small-scale generators, by their suppliers.

Further to the public consultation referred to above, my Department is developing a final scheme design for the MSS which incorporates feedback from the consultation and subsequent additional analysis. It is envisaged that a proposal on the supports to be offered to homeowners, farms, schools and businesses under the MSS, which may include grants or premium tariff payments for new installations, will be submitted to Government later this year.

### **Energy Conservation**

44. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the qualifying grant year of 2006 for insulation and heating control grants in houses will be extended to houses built before 2011 given the requirement for better insulation values in houses to maximise the efficiency of heat pumps and climate friendly heating upgrades; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41851/21]

51. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if there is any consideration of making Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland grants available to improve energy efficiency and insulation for homes built after 2011; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42115/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**  
I propose to take Questions Nos. 44 and 51 together.

My Department funds a number of SEAI grant schemes to support homeowners to improve the energy efficiency of their properties. Since 2000, over 450,000 homeowners have upgraded their homes with support from these schemes, representing nearly one home in four across the country. This has resulted in warmer, healthier and more comfortable homes that are easier to heat and light.

Building Regulations have been progressively strengthened and new buildings must now meet very high energy performance standards. Homes constructed since 2006 are generally more energy efficient than those built before due to energy performance requirements of the 2003 Building Regulations. For this reason, there is no grant incentive for residential insulation and heating controls for houses built and occupied after 2006. However, grant funding for renewable energy measures are available to homes built before 2011.

There are currently no plans to change the date of eligibility for SEAI insulation and heating controls grant assistance for homes built and occupied after 2006.

It is important to note that the grants available through SEAI aim to maximise emission reductions and deliver energy savings for the widest range of homeowners possible. The grants which are available, and their respective eligibility criteria, were chosen as the most likely to deliver significant energy savings to homeowners at the best value for money for the Exchequer.

Full details on the application processes for all schemes operated by the SEAI are available at [www.seai.ie](http://www.seai.ie).

*Question No. 45 answered with Question No. 43.*

### **Renewable Energy Generation**

46. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the person or body that are the beneficiaries for the new solar farm (details supplied) in Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41928/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Communities Energy Grant Scheme (CEG) makes grant funding available for community-based partnerships to improve the energy efficiency of the building stock in their area and to install renewables. The Scheme provides funding support for projects that deliver energy savings to a range of homeowners, communities and private sector organisations. This cross-sectoral approach facilitates community-wide energy improvements more efficiently and cost-effectively than might otherwise be possible. A capital budget of €30 million has been provided for the Communities Energy Grant Scheme in 2021.

I am advised by the Sustainable Energy Agency of Ireland (SEAI) that the pharmaceutical manufacturer Ely Lilly received support under this Scheme for the solar PV installation referred to by the Deputy. The solar installation was part of a project proposed by North Cork Enterprise (NCE) which also included the participation of the Carbury Housing Association Sustainable Energy Community. The SEAI also advise that the solar PV installation at the site will generate approximately 5,000 megawatt-hours (MWh) of sustainable power and will reduce the nearby pharmaceutical plant's carbon footprint by up to 2,000 tonnes per year. In addition, the Carbury Housing Association Sustainable Energy Community will benefit from a significant financial transfer from the solar farm donating their energy credits. Works will be facilitated in a number of the Carbury Housing Association houses as a direct result of these credit transfers.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

47. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the measures he is taking to promote or facilitate remote working for staff in his Department or bodies under the aegis of his Department; the costs this has generated in terms of the provision of laptops, desktop computers or contributions to wi-fi costs or phone-related expenses; the number of staff who have applied for permission to work from home on a permanent or hybrid-model basis (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41951/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department is currently working in line with Government COVID 19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. Over the period of the pandemic staff in the Department have worked hard under difficult circumstances to advance and deliver on our vision of a climate neutral, sustainable and digitally connected Ireland.

A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. One of the key objectives of the Blended Working Framework is to deliver on the Programme for Government commitment to move to 20% remote working. It is anticipated that my Department's Blended Working Policy will be in place by Q1 2022 in line with central Government guidance. A key aim of the policy will be to balance and support the business needs of the Department with retaining the flexibility and benefits of remote working.

The Department has two regional offices in Cavan and Wexford and we will be encouraging staff living in these regions to take advantage of these buildings as hubs for remote working. The ICT equipment costs arising from remote working is just over €290,000. Since March 2020, phone-related cost have amounted to just over €28,000. The information requested in relation to the agencies under the aegis of my Department is an operational matter for each

agency. The Department will request the relevant bodies to reply directly to the Deputy with the information requested in respect of their organisations.

### **Energy Policy**

48. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of work into developing a policy statement on the importation of fracked gas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41972/21]

87. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the position regarding reports of a proposal by a company (details supplied) to seek approval to build a gas plant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43192/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 48 and 87 together.

On 18 May 2021, the Government's Policy Statement on the Importation of Fracked Gas was published.

The policy statement provides that pending the outcome of a review of the security of energy supply of Ireland's electricity and natural gas systems being carried out by my Department, it would not be appropriate for the development of any LNG terminals in Ireland to be permitted or proceeded with.

The review is focusing on the period to 2030 in the context of ensuring a sustainable pathway to 2050. The review includes a technical analysis which will help inform a public consultation. It is planned that the technical analysis will be published and the public consultation undertaken later this year. The review, once completed, will be submitted to Government.

I understand that an application has been made to An Bord Pleanála for a project in County Kerry that includes an LNG terminal. Under the Planning and Development Act 2000. An Bord Pleanála is statutorily obliged to have regard to Government policy, including the policy statement set out above, when evaluating such applications.

### **Electricity Grid**

49. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding electricity outages; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41975/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Commission for Regulation of Utilities (the CRU) has statutory responsibility, under S.I. 60 of 2005, to ensure security of electricity supply. The CRU has the duty to monitor electricity supplies and to take such measures as it considers necessary to protect security of supply. It is assisted in its statutory role by EirGrid, Ireland's electricity transmission system operator, which is required to report to the CRU with regard to security of electricity supply matters. EirGrid is also responsible for the day-to-day management of the electricity transmission system.

The CRU and EirGrid have advised that they have identified specific challenges to ensuring continued electricity security of supply, which they are currently in the process of addressing, including : lower than expected availability of some existing power stations; anticipated new power stations not being developed as planned; expected growth in demand for electricity

including due to the growth of data centres; and the expected closure of power stations that make up approximately 25% of conventional electricity generation capacity over time. Our decarbonisation commitments must proceed while addressing these challenges.

A range of actions is being taken by the CRU and EirGrid in relation to security of electricity supply over the coming winter and years ahead. These actions being progressed include: maximising the availability of existing generators; development of new generation capacity; making changes to the grid connection rules for data centres, and working with large energy consumers to, where possible, reduce their electricity demand during peak periods. My Department is working closely with the CRU and EirGrid in order to progress these actions.

It should be noted that the closure of two of the three peat-fired power stations in the midlands was a result of the ESB not securing planning permission from the relevant planning authority for their future operation. The third peat-fired power station, owned by Bord na Mona, is currently in the process of seeking planning permission to operate beyond 2023.

*Question No. 50 answered with Question No. 43.*

*Question No. 51 answered with Question No. 44.*

### **National Broadband Plan**

52. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will take steps in order that two properties (details supplied) in Clonegal, County Carlow that are in the process of being renovated will be included and connected to the NBI. [42192/21]

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

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

Complaints about service provision are a matter to be dealt with between the consumer and the service provider in the first instance. If this avenue has been exhausted without a satisfactory resolution, the Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg) may be able to assist further. ComReg is the independent body that issues licences to broadband service providers and investigates complaints to make sure that companies are delivering services in line with their licence obligations.

Notwithstanding this, my Department has investigated the matter and I understand that both premises are connected to the nearby FTTC (fibre to the cabinet) and therefore these premises should be able to access high speed broadband from a commercial operator.

### **Climate Action Plan**

53. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications further to Parliamentary Question No. 176 of 15 June 2021, the status of his plans to provide the National Dialogue on Climate Action with an enduring structure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42212/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** In May of this year, my Department held a series of climate conversations under the National Dialogue for Climate Action (NDCA), including a broad Public Consultation where we heard from 4,000 people, communities and organisations capturing their views on the climate challenge, their perceived capacity to act to combat climate change, and what Government needs to do to make it easier to live in a sustainable way.

These conversations indicated a sense of urgency among the public around climate change and an eagerness to actively engage in a national response. I am committed to publishing the results of that conversation shortly and can confirm that they are informing the Climate Action Plan 2021 and the development of a revised structure for the National Dialogue on Climate Action (NDCA) both which will shortly be completed.

### Telecommunications Services

54. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will respond to concerns and proposals (details supplied) in relation to a possible deterrent for scam calls which have increased exponentially here over the past 12 months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42260/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** The telecommunications market is regulated by the Commission for Communications Regulation, including in relation to operational issues such as detecting or monitoring scam calls.

I understand that scam call numbers can resemble normal, familiar geographical or international numbers encountered on a daily basis, and the Regulator has published information for consumers in relation to this issue ([www.comreg.ie/consumer-information/mobile-phone/scam-calls-2/](http://www.comreg.ie/consumer-information/mobile-phone/scam-calls-2/)).

This provides advice urging vigilance at all times on the part of consumers and listing suggestions for the proactive steps to be taken by those receiving scam calls, and in particular, advising people not to answer or to call back any number which they do not recognise or where there is a bland or no voicemail left.

The notice also provides a phone number for consumers to contact and the Regulator also offers a text call back service and other facilities to assist consumers. In the meantime, ComReg continues to monitor the situation closely.

In addition, the Investigation of scam calls from a criminal perspective is a matter for an Garda Síochána. I understand that AGS has also raised public awareness to warn phone users on the need to remain continually alert with respect to calls and text messages.

### National Broadband Plan

55. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps he has taken to date to accelerate the roll-out of the National Broadband

Plan; the emission reduction impact of an accelerated roll-out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42298/21]

**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. I am advised by NBI that, as of 27 August, over 249,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed with over 92,000 premises under construction.

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 on-boarding and training people. Inevitably, like many other organisations, NBI and contractor staff have been at risk of contracting Covid 19 or may have had to restrict their movements as a result of being a close contact posing further challenges. The full extent of this impact is currently being assessed and NBI has committed to put in place measures to mitigate the impact in so far as possible.

The Programme for Government commits to seek to accelerate the roll out of the National Broadband Plan. The Department continues to engage with NBI to explore the feasibility of accelerating aspects of the NBP rollout to establish the possibility of bringing forward premises which are currently scheduled in years 6 and 7 of the current plan to an earlier date. Exploring the potential to accelerate the network rollout is being undertaken in parallel with the measures required to mitigate delays arising as a result of Covid-19. As part of that work NBI is engaging with all current build partners to bring forward build activities and is also actively reviewing other possible build partners where such options could also speed up the build process. 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/](https://nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/)*

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

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

## Energy Conservation

56. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when the independent analysis of the warmth and wellbeing scheme first commenced by an organisation (details supplied) will be completed; if he has received any interim reports; when the final report will be available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42299/21]

67. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the current status of the independent analysis of the warmth and wellbeing scheme carried out by the London School of Tropical Medicine; the reason for the delay in its completion and publication; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42532/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 56 and 67 together.

The Warmth and Wellbeing pilot scheme aims to objectively measure and validate the health and wellbeing impacts of improving the living conditions of vulnerable people living in energy poverty with chronic respiratory conditions. The scheme is a collaboration between my Department and the Department of Health and is jointly administered by the Health Service Executive and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland. Since 2016 over 1,300 homes have received free upgrades to their homes, including attic and wall insulation, window and door replacement and heating system upgrades where needed.

The Exchequer investment in this scheme has significantly improved the warmth and comfort of the homes involved. Initial reports have indicated that the upgrades are also delivering benefits to the health and wellbeing of participants, including reports of needing fewer GP and hospital visits, fewer prescriptions for antibiotics as well as increased engagement with other support services in the community. An independent analysis is being carried out by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), in collaboration with the Health Service Executive.

The research element of the scheme has unfortunately experienced significant delays due to complications associated with GDPR, Brexit and more recently the COVID-19 emergency. However, every effort is being made to progress the research as quickly as possible and I intend to publish the results before the end of this year. The findings will inform Government's approaches to retrofitting, especially with regard to those who are more vulnerable and at risk of energy poverty

## Telecommunications Services

57. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he or his Department have engaged with communications and telecom providers regarding the increase in the amount of scam calls persons have been receiving; if so, if solutions have been proposed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42310/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** The telecommunications market is regulated by the Commission for Communications Regulation, including in relation to operational issues such as detecting or monitoring scam calls.

While I understand that it is not possible to identify scam call numbers in advance, which can resemble normal, familiar geographical or international numbers encountered on a daily

basis, the Regulator has published information for consumers in relation to this issue [www.comreg.ie/consumer-information/mobile-phone/scam-calls-2/](http://www.comreg.ie/consumer-information/mobile-phone/scam-calls-2/)).

This provides advice urging vigilance at all times on the part of consumers and listing suggestions for the proactive steps to be taken by those receiving scam calls, and in particular, advising people not to answer or to call back any number which they do not recognise or where there is a bland or no voicemail left.

The notice also provides a phone number for consumers to contact and the Regulator also offers a text call back service and other facilities to assist consumers. In the meantime, ComReg continues to monitor the situation closely.

In addition, the Investigation of scam calls from a criminal perspective is a matter for an Garda Síochána. I understand that AGS has also raised public awareness to warn phone users on the need to remain continually alert with respect to calls and text messages

### National Broadband Plan

58. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when high-speed fibreoptic broadband is expected to be available in an area (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42359/21]

**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](http://www.broadband.gov.ie). The AMBER area represents the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led intervention.

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

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) that, as of 27 August, over 249,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Surveys are complete or underway in County Kildare in Killashee, Oughterard, Naas Rural, Rathmore, Kill, Kiltel, Carnalway, Giltown, Ballymore Eustace, Bodenstown, Naas Urban, Newtown, Donaghcumper, Athy, Coneyboro, Aughaboura, Ballinapark, Castlemitchell, Bert, Kilberry, Kilkea, Leixlip, Celbridge and Maynooth. Areas which are close to the Wicklow border have commenced build works as part of the Blessington Deployment Area.

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

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. As of 27 August, 366 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 Bigstone Community Hall, Crookstown Further Education and Training and Community Centre, and Lullymore Heritage Park. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

Rathmore National School, Saint David's National School and Piper's Hill Campus 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/](https://nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/).

## Electricity Generation

59. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the changes that have taken place to the electricity market rules in order to enable micro-generated electricity to be sold to the grid; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42497/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government commits to expanding and incentivising micro-generation to help people generate renewable electricity for their own use and sell excess electricity back to the grid. Under the Climate Action Plan, a Micro-Generation working group, chaired by my Department, is developing an enabling framework for micro-generation which tackles existing barriers and establishes suitable supports within relevant market segments.

My Department outlined proposals for a new Micro-generation Support Scheme (MSS) in a public consultation that closed on 18 February last. A summary report of the submissions received has been published on my Department's website. While the primary aim of a micro-generation scheme is to enable a household to meet its own electricity needs, it is envisaged that a suitable payment for excess electricity generated on site and exported to the grid will be available to all renewables self-consumers later this year, subject to regulatory arrangements, and in line with transposition of Articles 21 and 22 of Directive (EU) 2018/2001 on the promotion of the use of energy from renewable sources. It is expected that the Commission for Regulation of Utilities will publish a draft framework in the coming weeks which will outline the details, including eligibility criteria and timescales for introduction, of the Clean Export Guarantee (CEG) payment for exported renewable electricity. This framework will introduce an obligation on all electricity suppliers to offer remuneration to their customers, by way of a CEG payment, for excess renewable electricity exported to the grid by eligible micro- and small-scale generators. This would give effect to the above-mentioned Articles of the Directive and allow for the commencement of export payments to micro- and small-scale generators, by their suppliers.

## Waste Management

60. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the engagement he has had with the Minister for Social Protection with regard to the Joint Oireachtas Committees Pre-Budget Submission recommendation to ensure that the

incontinence payment reaches those in need of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42498/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department has engaged with relevant public bodies such as the Department of Social Protection, the National Disability Authority, the HSE, and the Department of Health and representative organisations such as Family Carer’s Ireland, Age Action, the Alzheimer Society of Ireland, the Irish Wheelchair Association, Spina Bifida Hydrocephalus Ireland and Multiple Sclerosis Society of Ireland, in an effort to see how best to support persons with long-term incontinence with respect to the disposal of medical incontinence wear.

Since mid-2017, a range of charging options have operated, which encourage householders to reduce and separate their waste. This provides flexibility to waste collectors to develop various service-price offerings that suit different household circumstances. Representatives from the waste industry were in positive discussions when a per kilogramme charging model was planned, however mandatory per kilogramme ‘pay by weight’ charging was not introduced and therefore their participation ended. A Price Monitoring Group (PMG) was established in mid-2017 to monitor the on-going cost of residential waste collection to homeowners across Ireland as the ‘flat-rate structure’ was being phased out. While fluctuations in prices and service offerings have been observed, the overall trend has been relative price stability. Results from the PMG are available on my Department’s website.

In September 2020, Minister Ryan launched a new national waste policy for the period 2020-2025, A Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy. This plan contains a range of measures to empower households through enhanced consumer protection requirements. It also envisages an enhanced monitoring of the market to ensure continued relative price stability.

### **Environmental Schemes**

61. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications further to Parliamentary Question No. 43 of 16 June 2021, the progress to date of the National Parks and Wildlife Service peatland scheme for large-scale peatlands restoration in 2021; the number of Bord na Móna employees reassigned to date from peat harvesting activities; the number of Bord na Móna seasonal staff re-employed on each bog in which rehabilitation has commenced; the planned recruitment on each bog to be rehabilitated in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42488/21]

62. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications further to Parliamentary Question No. 51 of 16 June 2021, the details of the progress to date of Bord na Móna’s large-scale peatlands restoration project and the number of Bord na Móna employees reassigned to date from peat harvesting activities; the number of Bord na Móna seasonal staff re-employed on each bog in which rehabilitation has commenced; the planned recruitment on each bog to be rehabilitated in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42489/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 61 and 62 together.

The Government is committed to a just transition in the Midlands region and has dedicated significant funding to supporting workers, companies and communities affected by the closure of the peat-fired power stations and the end of peat harvesting by Bord na Móna.

The Government approved funding of €108 million for Bord na Móna’s large-scale peat-

lands project to rehabilitate 33,000 hectares of peatlands under the Enhanced Decommissioning, Rehabilitation and Restoration Scheme. The Scheme has resulted in Bord Na Móna reassigning employees from peat harvesting activities into rehabilitation operations, while supporting the natural environment and biodiversity of the peatlands.

In addition, the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is currently undertaking a programme to restore Ireland's raised bog Special Areas of Conservation and Natural Heritage Areas, a key action of the National Raised Bog Special Areas of Conservation Management Plan 2017-2022. In April 2020, following a public procurement process, the Department awarded a contract to Bord Na Móna to project manage the implementation of the latest element of the Department's national protected raised bog restoration programme, to provide other necessary professional services and undertake the restoration measures on behalf of his Department.

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

With respect specifically to the Enhanced Decommissioning, Rehabilitation and Restoration Scheme, to date across counties Galway, Meath, Kildare, Westmeath, Offaly, Roscommon, Laois and Longford, my Department has been advised by Bord na Mona that 220 jobs have been assigned. This excludes BnM employees working on rehabilitation activities under contract for the NPWS. Rehabilitation under the Enhanced Decommissioning, Rehabilitation and Restoration Scheme has commenced on 16 bogs and all operatives involved have been re-assigned from peat harvesting activities.

I have asked BnM to provide the further detailed information directly to the Deputy.

*Question No. 62 answered with Question No. 61.*

### National Broadband Plan

63. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to upgrade broadband services at livestock marts; the timeline for each mart concerned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42522/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network and currently include primary schools, community centres, sports centres and agricultural marts. To date most of that activity has focussed on community halls, sports centres and schools.

While schools are now clearly the main focus of this element of the NBP, other locations of a strategic nature in the intervention area continue to be assessed. Agricultural marts located in the intervention area were contacted and 11 are now in line for connection as a BCP.

Carnross Mart is planned for installation by the end of Q3 2021 with the remaining marts scheduled during 2022.

County	Site Name	Eircode
Carlow	Tullow Livestock Sales, Abbey St, Tullow	R93E431
Clare	Clare Marts, Ltd, Caherminane, Kilfenora	V95XN59

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County	Site Name	Eircode
Galway	Mountbellew Regional Mart, Mountbellew	H53HW98
Galway	Maam Cross Mart, Recess (aka Burkes)	H91V520
Galway	Headford Co-Op Mart, Balrikard, Headford	H91K7TH
Kerry	Gortatlea Mart, Ballymacelligot, Tralee	V92CY98
Leitrim	GCM, Carrigallen Mart, Calloughs	H12WP65
Mayo	Balla Mart, Carrowntober Oughter, Co Mayo	SCP0872
Meath	Carnaross Mart	A82AP90
Roscommon	Castlerea Co-Op Livestock Mart, Castlerea	F45FC91
Wexford	New Ross Livestock Marts Ltd, Rosbercon	Y34AF59

### **National Broadband Plan**

64. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to upgrade broadband services at schools; the timeline for each school concerned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42523/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network and currently include primary schools, community centres, sports centres and agricultural marts. To date most of that activity has focussed on community halls, sports centres and schools.

My Department has now prioritised primary schools with no high speed broadband and continues to work with the Department of Education in this regard. An acceleration of this aspect of the National Broadband Plan will see some 677 primary schools connected to high speed broadband by the end of 2022, well ahead of the original target delivery timeframe of 2026.

Of the 677 schools 137 have been installed by National Broadband Ireland to date: 81 are connected and now live, 31 are awaiting connection by the retail service provider (RSP) and 25 are awaiting to be awarded an RSP by the Department of Education. It is expected that well in excess of 200 will be installed by the end of this year with all 677 schools connected by end 2022.

### **Waste Management**

65. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the current status of the working group established to examine the national end-of-waste applications backlog; the number of applications with the EPA for end-of-waste status for recovered waste materials; the number received in each calendar year; the number of applications processed in each calendar year; the number of staff and grades working full-time on these applications; the average processing time for a standard application and for a priority application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42530/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Waste Framework Directive provides a framework whereby material recovered or recycled from waste may be considered to no longer be waste. As the competent authority in Ireland for End of Waste determinations is the EPA, questions in relation to applications are more appropriately directed to that Agency than to myself, and I have asked the EPA to respond directly to the Deputy with the detailed information sought.

I am very conscious of the importance of the End of Waste in the transition to a more circular economy, in particular in relation to the construction sector. The *Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy* which was launched by Minister Ryan in September 2020, has a dedicated chapter on End of Waste, and commits to a number of measures including to the establishment of a working group to develop national end-of-waste applications for identified priority waste streams. This working group has now been established with the first meeting taking place in March 2020. My officials, in conjunction with the members of the working group, are currently considering what waste streams should be prioritised for national end-of-waste applications.

### **Environmental Policy**

66. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the current status of the carbon capture and storage feasibility study being conducted on behalf of his Department; the reason for the delay in its completion and publication; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42531/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The carbon capture and storage (CCS) feasibility study, which is being carried out by Ervia, comprises a desktop study examining technical, economic, safety, regulatory, and environmental aspects of capturing, transporting and storing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Ervia has provided regular updates to the Steering Group, established to examine the feasibility of CCS in Ireland under the 2019 Climate Action Plan, on the study's progress and submitted its initial assessment of CCS for Ireland in November 2019.

Subsequently, as an EU Project of Common Interest (PCI) included on the 4th EU PCI List, project promoter, Ervia, successfully applied for €1 million in EU grant funding through the EU Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) in May 2020. Using this grant funding, Ervia is carrying out a further detailed study regarding the transport of CO<sub>2</sub> in the Cork area. Funding secured through the successful CEF application will cover approximately half of the study's anticipated €2 million cost, with the study scheduled to conclude in 2022.

Taking account of the ongoing work, the updated Interim Climate Actions, published in March 2021, included the development of a framework for analysis of the potential for CCS deployment for Ireland by Q4 2022.

*Question No. 67 answered with Question No. 56.*

### **Climate Change Policy**

68. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if, as part of the target of reducing 51% of emissions over 12 years includes specific annual targets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42563/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, establishes a legally binding framework with clear targets and commitments set in law, and provides that the necessary structures and processes are embedded on a statutory basis to ensure Ireland achieves its national, EU and international climate goals and obligations in the near and long term.

The Act requires Government to adopt a series of economy-wide five-year carbon budgets, including sectoral targets for each relevant sector, on a rolling 15-year basis, starting in 2021.

The first two five-year carbon budgets proposed by the CCAC will equate to a total reduction of 51% in emissions over the period to 2030, in line with the Programme for Government commitment.

The policies and measures to achieve the targets in these Budgets and Sectoral Emission Ceilings will be set out in the Climate Action Plan due to be published in autumn 2021 and will be updated annually thereafter.

The Carbon Budgets called for by the Act are for five-year periods and will not set targets for individual years. However, Ireland has parallel obligations under European Law which do set annual limits on carbon emissions.

### **Climate Change Policy**

69. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the five-year carbon budgets will include targets set for each five-year period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42564/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 provides that each carbon budget is to represent the total amount of greenhouse gases that may be emitted in the State during each 5 year period, measured in tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent. This in and of itself is a target. The carbon budgets will be consistent with furthering the achievement of the national climate objective and include all greenhouse gases. The budgets shall provide for a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions such that the total amount of annual greenhouse gas emissions in the year ending on 31 December 2030 is 51 per cent less than the annual greenhouse gas emissions reported for the year ending on 31 December 2018, as set out in the national greenhouse gas emissions inventory prepared by the Environmental Protection Agency.

The Act is framed within the context of our international obligations. It provides a limited number of matters which the Climate Change Advisory Council will consider when proposing carbon budgets. This includes relevant scientific advice, international best practice on the reporting of greenhouse gas emissions and removals, and principles of climate justice.

### **Climate Change Policy**

70. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the Climate Change Advisory Council will have a role in determining whether Ireland is on track to meet our emission reduction targets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42565/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Climate Change Advisory Council will have a role in the consideration of progress in relation to our emissions targets. The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 requires that the Minister for Climate Action must give an account annually to a Joint Committee of the Oireachtas for compliance with the carbon budget and progress under the Climate Action Plan. The Joint Committee considerations will also be informed by the annual report of the Climate Change Advisory Council, which - under the Act - will now also include assessment of compliance with the carbon budget, and with sectoral emissions ceiling for that

period.

### **Climate Change Policy**

71. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will set individual sector targets for emission reductions to ensure Ireland meets our emission reduction targets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42566/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 provides that carbon budgets will be prepared and updated every five years. It will be the responsibility of the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communication to prepare, within the limits of the carbon budget, the maximum amount of greenhouse gas emissions that are permitted in different sectors of the economy during a budget period. These are referred to in the Act as a ‘sectoral emissions ceiling’ and different ceilings may apply to different sectors.

The sectors of the economy to which each sectoral emissions ceiling shall apply shall be determined from time to time by the Government. The Minister shall, when preparing a sectoral emissions ceiling, consult with such Ministers of the Government as he or she considers appropriate. The Minister shall, as soon as may be after a carbon budget takes effect under section 6B, finalise and submit each sectoral emissions ceiling to the Government for approval.

*Question No. 72 answered with Question No. 43.*

### **Flexible Work Practices**

73. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps being taken to facilitate remote working within his Department in particular to encourage remote working for those who live in the regions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42705/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department is currently working in line with Government COVID 19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. Over the period of the pandemic staff in the Department have worked hard under difficult circumstances to advance and deliver on our vision of a climate neutral, sustainable and digitally connected Ireland.

A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. One of the key objectives of the Blended Working Framework is to deliver on the Programme for Government commitment to move to 20% remote working. It is anticipated that my Department’s Blended Working Policy will be in place by Q1 2022 in line with central Government guidance. A key aim of the policy will be to balance and support the business needs of the Department with retaining the flexibility and benefits of remote working.

The Department has two regional offices in Cavan and Wexford and we will be encouraging staff living in these regions to take advantage of these buildings as hubs for remote working.

### **Recycling Policy**

74. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the plans in place to tackle the plastic crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42727/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy details the measures that will be adopted to achieve optimum results in the area of plastics and packaging. The over-riding objective is to ensure that all packaging placed on the Irish market is reusable or recyclable in an economically viable way by 2030. It sets out a level of ambition which will position Ireland as a frontrunner towards the attainment of EU packaging recycling targets including:

- overall packaging recycling rates of 65% by 2025 and 70% by 2030 and
- material specific plastic recycling rates of 50% by 2025 and 55% by 2030.

The Plan also outlines the measures Ireland is taking under the Single Use Plastics Directive (EU 2019/904) to substantially reduce the amount of single use plastic items we use and to sustainably manage the waste arising from those we do. From 3 July this year single use plastic cutlery, plates, stirrers, straws, balloon sticks and cotton bud sticks may not be placed on the Irish market. This ban also applies to single use expanded polystyrene cups and food containers and all products containing oxo-degradable plastic. In addition, I will shortly be establishing the regulatory framework for a deposit and refund scheme that will become operational in Ireland next year and will ensure plastic bottles and aluminium cans are collected and managed in the most sustainable manner.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

75. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the way in which his Department and public bodies and agencies under his remit are accommodating requests for persons to work from home. [42755/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department is currently working in line with Government COVID 19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. Over the period of the pandemic staff in the Department have worked hard under difficult circumstances to advance and deliver on our vision of a climate neutral, sustainable and digitally connected Ireland.

A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. One of the key objectives of the Blended Working Framework is to deliver on the Programme for Government commitment to move to 20% remote working. It is anticipated that my Department's Blended Working Policy will be in place by Q1 2022 in line with central Government guidance. A key aim of the policy will be to balance and support the business needs of the Department with retaining the flexibility and benefits of remote working.

The Department has two regional offices in Cavan and Wexford and we will be encouraging staff living in these regions to take advantage of these buildings as hubs for remote working. The information requested in relation to the agencies under the aegis of my Department is an operational matter for each agency. The Department will request the relevant bodies to reply directly to the Deputy with the information requested in respect of their organisations.

76. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when the 2020 annual transition statement will be published as required by section 14(1) of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42777/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Annual Transition Statement (ATS), established under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, serves an important function in providing an overview of climate change mitigation and adaptation policy measures adopted to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and to adapt to the effects of climate change in order to enable the achievement of the national transition objective.

In this regard, the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, which amends the 2015 Act, significantly strengthens the statutory framework for governance of the climate challenge, and ensure delivery of successive Climate Action Plans and Long-term Climate Strategies, supported by a system of carbon budgeting and sectoral targets with appropriate oversight by Government, the Oireachtas and a new Climate Change Advisory Council.

The Act introduces greater accountability arrangements with an enhanced role for the Oireachtas – Ministers will have to give account for their performance towards sectoral targets and actions before an Oireachtas Committee each year replacing the current Annual Transition Statement process.

I propose to prepare an Annual Transition Statement for 2020 which I intend to publish this year.

### **National Broadband Plan**

77. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the estimated cost of missing the target for the roll-out of high speed rural broadband in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42779/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** As I outlined in my response to Question Number 202 of 13 July last, the National Broadband Plan (NBP) contract with National Broadband Ireland (NBI) contains a number of targets and milestones to be completed by NBI in order to deliver the rollout of high-speed broadband services to all premises in the Intervention Area by 2026. NBI is only entitled to claim the payment of relevant subsidy when the targets and milestones have been met. Subsidy payments are therefore held until NBI meets the milestones set out in the NBP contract.

NBI has informed me that the target for homes passed in 2021 as part of the NBP rollout will be less than originally envisaged. This will have a financial impact in that less subsidy will be paid to NBI this year; the precise amount has yet to be determined. This will not impact the overall level of subsidy required for the NBP intervention.

### **Air Quality**

78. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress being made on the development of a national clean air strategy; when

he will publish this strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42873/21]

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

Having considered the submissions made by the public, health experts, advocacy groups, academia and industry, a framework for legislation has now been developed. From 2022 the following new standards for solid fuels will be introduced:

- Coal, coal-based products, any manufactured solid fuel or peat products will be required to have a smoke emission rate of less than 10g/hour, reducing to 5g/hr by 2025.

- It is not proposed to make any changes to the smoke emission rate for biomass products (that contain coal), as this is already set at 5g/hr.

- The sulphur content permitted for all fuels will be reduced from 2% to 1% over time.

- Wood sold in single units under 2m<sup>3</sup> will be required to have a moisture content of 25% or less, moving to 20% within 4 years, and wet wood sold over these volumes will be required to come with instructions for the purchaser on how to dry this wood.

These regulations will be finalised in the coming months and will be in place for the 2022 heating season. I have made the announcement now to allow those servicing the domestic solid fuel market to plan accordingly, and to continue to invest in less polluting alternatives.

This measure will be a central element of the Clean Air Strategy which will also identify and promote the integrated actions across Government required to reduce air pollution. I intend to open a public consultation on the Strategy in the near future.

## Air Quality

79. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of air monitoring stations that are currently operational on a county basis; the number of these that are currently located at schools; if he plans to expand the network; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42874/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The National Ambient Air Quality Monitoring Programme (AAMP), operated by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), has undergone significant investment and expansion in recent years, with the number of monitoring stations increasing from 30 in 2017 to 96 today.

All monitoring stations collect air quality data for a range of pollutants in order to provide information to the public, and for assessment against European legal limit values and World Health Organisation guideline values.

The siting of these stations is a matter for the EPA and details of their exact locations are available at [www.airquality.ie](http://www.airquality.ie).

A county-by-county breakdown is provided below:

Carlow	1
Cavan	1
Clare	2
Cork	8
Donegal	3
Dublin	30
Galway	2
Kerry	2
Kildare	3
Kilkenny	2
Laois	3
Leitrim	1
Limerick	7
Longford	1
Louth	2
Mayo	3
Meath	1
Monaghan	2
Offaly	4
Roscommon	1
Sligo	1
Tipperary	3
Waterford	2
Westmeath	2
Wexford	7
Wicklow	2
Total	96

Real-time data from these monitoring stations is available online at all times at [www.air-quality.ie](http://www.air-quality.ie) and the air quality readings are illustrated according to the Air Quality Index for Health.

The AAMP will be expanded further in the coming months to deliver a network of 110 stations, serving to increase the evidential base required to inform the policy measures necessary to improve the quality of our air.

While Ireland has traditionally focused on measurements from monitoring stations to assess air quality, there is a need to provide more local air quality information throughout the country. The intention is that the information generated through monitoring, will be augmented by a newly developed modelling and forecasting capability, which will provide an on-going air quality forecast service to the public.

This work is being developed as part of a new EU LIFE funded project called LIFE EMERALD, which commenced this year. By 2024, this modelling project will deliver a national air quality forecast, a near real-time nowcast, and historical modelled maps along with multiple awareness raising and citizen engagement elements.

## Data Centres

80. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the details of the progress being made to develop efficiency standards for equipment and processes for data centres as outlined in the Programme for Government; when those standards will be finalised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42876/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government commits to developing efficiency standards for equipment and processes, particularly those set to grow rapidly, such as data centres.

Earlier this year, the European Commission adopted Shaping Europe's Digital Future, which includes an objective to foster an open, democratic and sustainable society. Key actions include initiatives to achieve climate-neutral, highly energy efficient and sustainable data centres by no later than 2030. The EU Ecodesign Regulation on servers and data storage products sets minimum standards around the environmental impact of these products and requires that circular economy principles will be mandatory for suppliers of this type of equipment, from next year.

### **Government Communications**

81. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the details of correspondence with the Department of Foreign Affairs following the hacking of the phone of the Minister, Deputy Coveney, in 2020; if new procedures were initiated for security of Ministerial phones following this hacking; and if so, the details of the updated procedures. [42917/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** The National Cyber Security Centre does not comment on operational matters relating to the security of Government Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The security of the ICT systems of Government Departments is the responsibility of individual Departments.

### **Government Communications**

82. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if his Ministerial phones have been hacked or attempted to be hacked during the term of office.. [42923/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Department has no knowledge of the Minister's phone being compromised or of any attempt at compromising it.

### **Government Communications**

83. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he has ever used his personal phones for Government business; and if so, if the personal phones have been hacked during his term of office. [42941/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** The Department has no knowledge of the Minister's phone being compromised or of any attempt at compromising the phone.

## Freedom of Information

84. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of freedom of information requests responded to by his Department in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; the number of responses that included documents related to text messages and other phone message communications such as messages sent through an application (details supplied) in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42963/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The number of Freedom of Information requests my Department has received from 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021 is set out in the table below.

Year	Number of Freedom of Information Requests
2016	159
2017	195
2018	362
2019	464
2020	184
2021*	139

\*up to 08 September 2021

My Department does not maintain statistics relating to different record types, including documents related to text messages and other phone message communications such as messages sent through WhatsApp. This information is not readily available and its compilation would involve a disproportionate amount of time and work.

## Ministerial Appointments

85. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of formal and informal roles held by a person (details supplied) in the name of his Department or associated agency in the lifetime of this Government; when they were appointed to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43036/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The filling of positions in the Department or to Boards under the remit of my Department is conducted through the formal procedures and managed through the Public Appointments Service. The individual in question is not currently serving on any Board nor any other position that would require approval by the Minister or my Department.

## Departmental Communications

86. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he and or his special advisers and or officials use or have used services (details supplied) to communicate in the past 18 months. [43070/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** Officials in my Department currently use or have used in the past 18 months the software referred to in the Deputies question for official internal communications. I can confirm that accounts with both services were created on my behalf, to facili-

tate Green Party rather than Departmental business. The use of one of the specified services pre-dates my appointment as Minister, and I have not used the application for any Department or Government business since my appointment. I can also confirm advisors have used these services for Green Party business.

*Question No. 87 answered with Question No. 48.*

### **Coast Guard Service**

88. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport the estimated cost in 2022 if the budget for the Irish Coast Guard increased by 5%. [41459/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The 2021 allocation in the Revised Estimate for the Irish Coast Guard is €79.3m, including current and capital. A 5% increase on that budget would be €3.96m

### **Rail Network**

89. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport the amount Iarnród Éireann spent on maintenance on the Dublin to Sligo rail line in each of the years of 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [41460/21]

90. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport the amount Iarnród Éireann spent on maintenance the Dublin to Waterford rail line in each of the years of 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [41461/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 89 and 90 together.

As the Deputy may be aware, the Infrastructure Manager Multi Annual Contract (IMMAC) provides the funding framework for the protection and renewal of the railway network, including both the Dublin to Sligo and Dublin to Waterford rail lines. This is the second year of the current five year IMMAC programme, as approved by Government in 2020, and over the five years of the programme in excess of €1 billion in Exchequer funding will be made available to support delivery. This funding will increase service reliability and punctuality, improve journey times and ensure continued safety of rail services.

As the operation, maintenance and renewal of the rail network is a matter for Iarnród Éireann in the first instance, I have referred the Deputy's questions to the company for direct reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

*Question No. 90 answered with Question No. 89.*

### **Bus Services**

91. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Transport if he will address a matter regarding a bus service (details supplied) in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41483/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport, I am responsible for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, I am not involved

in day-to-day operational matters.

The issue raised in relation to a bus service in Cork is a matter for Bus Éireann and I have therefore forwarded the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply.

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

### Departmental Data

92. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Transport the number of vehicles that passed through the toll on the M4 between junction 8 and Junction 10 in each of the past five years and to date in 2021, by vehicle type; the amount of profit that was generated by the toll operator in each of the past five years and to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41495/21]

93. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Transport the number of vehicles that passed through the toll on the M3 between junction 5 and junction 6 and also between junction 9 and junction 10 over each of the past five years and to date in 2021; the breakdown of vehicles by type; the profit generated by the toll operator over each of the past five years and to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41496/21]

94. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Transport the amount of revenue that was collected from private toll operators throughout the country in each of the past five years and to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41503/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 92 to 94, inclusive, together.

As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. Under the Roads Acts 1993-2015, the operation and management of individual national roads is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. Matters relating to the day to day operations regarding national roads, including toll roads and the establishment of a system of tolls, are within the remit of TII. More specifically, the statutory power to levy tolls, to make toll bye-laws and to enter into agreements with private investors are vested in TII under Part V of the Roads Act 1993 (as amended).

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

*Question No. 93 answered with Question No. 92.*

*Question No. 94 answered with Question No. 92.*

### Bus Services

95. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Transport if suggested bus routes (details supplied) will be examined; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41525/21]

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

The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and

development of public transport infrastructure, including the implementation of BusConnects.

Noting their responsibility in relation to this matter, I have forwarded your query to the NTA for their consideration and direct reply.

### **Transport Policy**

96. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport if a response will issue to queries raised by a person (details supplied) in relation to the agreement of dangerous goods by road; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41578/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** This is a matter for the Road Safety Authority. I have referred the question to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response is not received within 10 days.

### **Departmental Staff**

97. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport the current policy regarding the employment of persons with disabilities in his Department and in each State and semi-State body under the aegis of his Department; the disability quota of his Department at present; if there is an active campaign to increase the disability workforce from the current target of 3% to a minimum of 6% by 2024; if this quota has now been exceeded; if so, the details of same; if there has been an advertised competition in relation to the quota; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41603/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Under the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities for 2015 – 2024, the Government has committed to progressively increasing the statutory target for the employment of people with disabilities from 3% to a minimum of 6% in the public sector by 2024. As a public sector organisation and equal opportunities employer, my Department is conscious of its statutory obligations and is continually working to ensure that it meets all commitments in this regard.

For the most part, staff recruitment into my Department is facilitated through the Public Appointments Service who provide reasonable accommodation to individuals with disabilities during their engagement with the recruitment process. In that regard, there is no designated recruitment competitions for the employment of people with disabilities in the Civil Service.

The Department of Transport is presently subject to specific legal obligations in the Disability Act 2005 and is required to reach and maintain a 3% target for the employment of staff with disabilities.

In the most recent survey, which was conducted earlier this year, 3.05% of staff in the Department of Transport disclosed that they had a disability in accordance with the Disability Act 2005.

The Deputy will be aware that the disclosure of a disability is a confidential and sensitive matter for staff and is not mandatory and the data disclosed refers to officers who have chosen to disclose a disability as defined under the Disability Act 2005.

My Department has also participated in the Willing Able Mentoring Programme (WAM) which is a work placement programme and provides paid work placements to graduates with disabilities.

I have asked the aegis bodies to respond directly to you on this matter and if you do not hear from them within 10 days you should contact my office.

### **Transport Policy**

98. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to provide resources to city councils to employ bicycle mounted enforcement officials in order to assist them in issuing fines and or compliance advice in respect of motor vehicles obstructing designated cycle lanes. [41630/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** Local authority traffic wardens are empowered by law to enforce a range of parking offences, including that of parking in a cycle lane. The recruitment, deployment, and resourcing of wardens are matters for each individual local authority and my Department has no role in this regard.

### **Aviation Industry**

99. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport if legal provisions have been made to ensure aisle chairs are provided onboard every flight for wheelchair users; the steps he is taking in relation to this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41869/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** The rights of disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility when travelling by air are protected by Regulation (EC) 1107/2006. The Regulation obliges tour operators, air carriers and airport management bodies to provide high-quality and practical help to disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility so that they have the same travel opportunities as others.

Air carriers are required to make all reasonable efforts to arrange seating to meet the needs of individuals with a disability or reduced mobility, on request and subject to safety requirements and availability. In addition, assistance in moving to toilet facilities must be provided if required. The Regulation also states that persons who require assistance must notify the air carrier at least 48 hours in advance of travel and should outline any specific requirements.

However, there are no specific legal provisions to ensure aisle chairs are provided onboard every flight for wheelchair users. Air carriers must comply with stringent European aviation safety regulations and compliance may impact on the equipment and seating available to persons with reduced mobility and disabled persons depending on the type of aircraft. There are no plans to introduce legislation mandating the provision of aisle chairs on all flights at this time. If any such proposals were to be introduced, they would be best considered in an EU-wide context. Any such proposals would be subject to relevant safety approvals by the European Union Aviation Safety Agency and its Member States.

The Commission for Aviation Regulation (CAR) is the designated body responsible for the enforcement of Regulation (EC) 1107/2006 in Ireland. Passengers are advised to contact their air carrier at the time of booking to ensure that seating and equipment can be provided which best meets an individual's needs. It is advisable that passengers who will require an aisle chair, particularly when intending longer journeys, check availability in advance of booking and in writing. Further advice is available on the CAR's dedicated passenger rights website [www.flihhrights.ie](http://www.flihhrights.ie).

### **Driver Test**

100. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport when an essential driver (details supplied) in County Kerry will be given a date for a driver test; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41900/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** The driving test is the statutory responsibility of the Road Safety Authority.

Individual cases are a matter for the Authority and the question in relation to this case is being referred to it for direct reply.

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

### **Road Safety**

101. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the number, type, that is, fatal, serious, and minor and location of collisions recorded on each national road and motorway in each of the years 2015 to 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41943/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** My Department cannot provide all the details required. Details on collisions are recorded and provided by An Garda Síochána which falls under the remit of the Department of Justice.

While the Road Safety Authority does publish some statistics detailing the number, type and location of collisions, this is only following verification of the incident which can, in some cases, be a considerable time after the actual event has taken place. This is because inquests, coroner's reports and court cases can take a number of years to be settled.

However, some of the information is currently being compiled by Transport Infrastructure Ireland which I will forward to to the Deputy.

### **Departmental Staff**

102. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Transport the measures he is taking to promote or facilitate remote working for staff in his Department or bodies under the aegis of his Department; the costs this has generated in terms of the provision of laptops, desktop computers or contributions to Wi-Fi costs or phone-related expenses; the number of staff who have applied for permission to work from home on a permanent or hybrid-model basis (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41962/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department has robustly facilitated remote working for staff in roles across all office locations, where feasible, over the last 18 months. We have been particularly conscious of the need to minimise the pressure on the public transport system to support essential workers travelling safely. This has included the supply of IT equipment to enable an effective and productive working environment at home for our people. Departments and Offices are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. With restrictions now lifting, plans are being implemented to enable staff to transition to a mix of working together in the office while maintaining an element of working from home, gradually and safely, until a

blended working scheme is in place

A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

My Department will develop its own Blended Working arrangements in line with the central policy framework. Once arrangements have been finalised, Officers of the Department will be invited to apply.

To date, the provision of laptops, desktop computers and contributions to Wi-Fi costs or phone-related expenses to facilitate remote working has generated a total cost of €97,772.22. The supply of other equipment, such as office chairs and desks, has generated a total cost of €13,508.79.

### **Driver Licences**

103. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport if he will address a matter (details supplied) in relation to the renewal of driver licences; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41969/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard 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 authorisation was received on 30 June under EU Regulation 2021/267 and was applied on 2 July 2021.

When the extension was applied, the expiry date on the driver file for each person affected was updated to the new expiry date. It is not possible to extend or not extend individual driving licences. By law, a driving licence cannot be renewed more than 3 months before the expiry of the licence.

Where required, a medical report or eyesight report must be dated not more than one month prior to the date of application. This 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 reports that are no longer required, owing to the extension of their licences. However, for all classes of licence where a medical report is required, it is the applicant's responsibility to provide this and there is no mechanism to reimburse individual applicants.

### **Driver Licences**

104. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Transport if he will consider allowing qualified drivers from Ghana to drive lorries in Ireland due to the fact that many companies are having difficulty recruiting drivers in Ireland at the moment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42007/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** An Irish or EU driving licence is required in order to drive in Ireland. To be licensed to drive on Irish roads, a person must meet the high standards of safety of the driving test set out in national

and EU legislation.

A person with a non-EU driving licence can exchange their licence for an Irish licence if there is an exchange agreement in place with that country. Otherwise, they will have to go through the normal process of obtaining an Irish licence. An Irish licence can only be issued to a person resident in Ireland.

Reaching a driving licence exchange agreement with another country is a comprehensive process carried out between the statutory licensing agencies in each state. To ensure the safety of road users, such agreements can be made only when the relevant authorities in each jurisdiction have studied and compared the two licensing regimes and are satisfied that they are comparable. If standards and procedures are not comparable, the process does not continue.

For Ireland, this task is undertaken by the Road Safety Authority. The exchange agreement process generally takes over a year of ongoing engagement, from initiation to completion, to provide the thoroughness required to ensure the safety of Irish road users.

The RSA is currently considering licence exchange agreements with several non-EU licensing authorities. However, licence exchange agreements with non-EU countries will not provide a short-term solution in Ireland to the worldwide shortage of heavy goods vehicle drivers and pursuit of such arrangements without proper examination of standards of training and testing would represent a significant potential risk to other road users.

### **Driver Test**

105. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Transport the arrangements currently in place to facilitate essential driving training lessons to be carried out in Portlaoise, County Laois and the midlands; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42008/21]

**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.

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.

### **Departmental Programmes**

106. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Transport the status of an application for inclusion on the safe routes to school scheme by a school (details supplied) in County Mayo; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42023/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** In March, I was delighted to launch the Safe Routes to School Programme which will support Active Travel infrastructure for selected

schools around the country.

As the Deputy is likely aware, the Safe Routes to School Programme aims to create safer walking and cycling routes within communities, alleviate congestion at the school gates and increase the number of students who walk or cycle to school by providing the necessary infrastructure.

All schools were eligible to apply to the programme and information was circulated from the Departments of Education and Transport to schools nationwide. I am delighted to say that by the deadline of 16th April, 932 applications had been received from schools in every county in Ireland.

You may be aware that 170 schools were notified on 21 June that they have been selected for inclusion in the first round of the Safe Routes to School (SRTS) Programme. The schools initially selected were assessed against a range of criteria including school type, location and the school's commitment to sustainable travel.

It is my understanding that S.N. Dhumha Thuama was not included in the first round of funding; however if they submitted an expression of interest ahead of the deadline, they will not be required to reapply as all schools which applied will come into the programme on a rolling basis.

The Safe Routes to School Programme is funded by my Department through the National Transport Authority and An Taisce's Green-Schools is co-ordinating the programme. Noting the NTA's responsibility in this matter I have forwarded your correspondence to them for a more detailed reply in relation to S.N. Dhumha Thuama's application.

### **Rail Network**

107. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Transport the proposals for investing and upgrading a railway line (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42034/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As the Deputy may be aware the Infrastructure Manager Multi Annual Contract (IMMAC) provides the funding framework for the protection and renewal of our railway infrastructure, including the Ballybrophy to Limerick rail line. This is the second year of the five year IMMAC programme, as approved by Government in 2020, and over the five years of the programme just over €1 billion in Exchequer funding will be made available to support delivery. This funding will increase service reliability and punctuality, improve journey times and ensure continued safety of rail services. In 2021 for example this programme will support an enhanced programme of track relaying on the Ballybrophy line.

Noting Iarnród Éireann's (IE) responsibility in the matter in the first instance, I have referred the Deputy's questions to IE for a more detailed reply on the matter raised. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 days.

### **Local Authorities**

108. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the amount that each local authority received under the bridge rehabilitation capital fund in 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42061/21]

109. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the amount each local authority received under the safety improvement works capital fund in 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42062/21]

110. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the amount local authority received under the community involvement scheme fund in 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42063/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 108 to 110, inclusive, together.

The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of each local authority in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from Councils' own resources supplemented by State road grants, where applicable.

Details of the regional and local road grant payments to local authorities in 2020 and grant allocations for 2021 are outlined in the regional and local road allocations and payments booklets which are available in the Oireachtas Library. The tables included in the allocations and payments booklets outline expenditure by type of grant programme.

The table below sets out the expenditure to the end of August this year for each local authority under the Bridge Rehabilitation Programme, the Safety Improvement Works Programme and the Community Involvement Scheme.

Local Authority	Bridge Rehabilitation Programme	Safety Improvement Works Programme	Community Involvement Scheme
Carlow	€2,418	€0	€0
Cavan	€116,295	€53,491	€0
Clare	€125,290	€0	€0
Cork County	€391,829	€55,733	€251,987
Donegal	€0	€25,922	€47,911
Galway County	€181,903	€39,549	€7,611
Kerry	€71,119	€6,660	€6,758
Kildare	€233,022	€0	€0
Kilkenny	€100,886	€12,993	€11,360
Laois	€125,765	€0	€40,706
Leitrim	€14,303	€47,110	€13,232
Limerick City & County	€696,55	€97,592	€107,923
Longford	€9,536	€0	€27,390
Louth	€1,538	€61,830	€0
Mayo	€58,630	€19,039	€301,503
Meath	€0	€0	€0
Monaghan	€118,727	€0	€0
Offaly	€115,121	€0	€4,000
Roscommon	€11,255	€49,069	€53,258
Sligo	€30,327	€6,072	€254,959
Tipperary	€144,323	€21,933	€0
Waterford City & County	€0	€0	€0
Westmeath	€0	€0	€117,572
Wexford	€142,028	€90,199	€0
Wicklow	€73,753	€122,674	€0
Cork City	€71,771	€0	N/A
Galway City	€0	€0	N/A
Totals	€2,209,494	€709,866	€1,246,170

*Question No. 109 answered with Question No. 108.*

*Question No. 110 answered with Question No. 108.*

### **Road Projects**

111. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the amount of funding that has been provided by the Government for the A5 upgrade in each year since the original commitment was made in 2007; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42064/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** When the original commitment was made to contribute to the A5 project, an expenditure profile linked to specific project milestones was approved by the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC). £22 million (sterling) was paid in three tranches over the period 2009 to 2012 and this fulfilled the Government's funding commitment under the original expenditure profile for project planning and design.

The current funding arrangements in relation to the A5 are governed by the commitments in the Stormont House Agreement and Implementation Plan - A Fresh Start and in the New Decade, New Approach document. The Government is committed to providing funding of £75 million (sterling) towards the cost of phase 1a of the A5 upgrade scheme subject to the satisfactory conclusion of the statutory planning process in Northern Ireland. To date this process has not been concluded.

### **Rail Network**

112. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport if the construction of the National Train Control Centre is on budget; the amount that has been spent to date on the National Train Control Centre; the estimated amount that will be spent in total; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42065/21]

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

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

### **Transport Policy**

113. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the amount of funding for transport projects that has been bid for and or awarded under the European Regional Development Fund in 2020 and to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42066/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** In 2020 and to date in 2021, my Department has not been awarded funding under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) but is currently actively pursuing ERDF funding opportunities under this programme.

The European Regional Development Fund aims to strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion in the European Union by correcting imbalances between its regions. In 2021-2027 it will enable investments in a smarter, greener, more connected and more social Europe that is closer to its citizens.

Overall responsibility for the European Regional Development Fund falls to the Department for Public Expenditure and Reform whereby Ireland will receive €351 million for the 2021-2027 programming period.

The ERDF planning process involves the three Regional Assemblies. In December 2020 the Regional Assemblies oversaw the production of a paper setting out high level priorities for the 2021-2027 ERDF Operational Programmes. These priorities have emerged from the Regional strategies (RSES), the Needs Analysis in relation to ERDF and the public consultation.

Three main Themes or priorities were identified:

- Smart cities, smart regions: ERDF should support innovation, digitisation, economic transformation and small and medium-sized businesses in keeping with smart specialisation strategies to support sustainable economic development and offer the population places where they can live and work.

- Low-carbon and climate resilience: ERDF should help Ireland and its regions fight against climate change and protect the environment, which will in turn improve the overall quality of life.

- Urban dimension: ERDF should support the development of Irish towns and cities through an integrated approach combining the three following dimensions: green, smart and people-focused.

Based on the three thematic areas identified the three Regional Assemblies are currently in the process of extensive engagement with government departments, including my Department, to develop proposals for the ERDF Operational Programme.

## **Transport Policy**

114. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the amount of funding for transport projects that has been bid for and or awarded under the PEACE+ programme in 2020 and to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42067/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The new PEACE PLUS Programme 2021-2027, which will build upon previous PEACE and INTERREG Programmes, will provide opportunities under the EU policy objective of “a more connected Europe”, contributing to the cross-border economic and territorial development of the region. In this regard, there has been significant bilateral engagement between my Department and the Department for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland, in consultation with the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) and the Department for Public Expenditure and Reform, to examine potential sustainable transport projects that fit the PEACE PLUS criteria.

Once funding arrangements are finalised, the draft PEACE PLUS co-operation programme will be brought to Government and to the Northern Ireland Executive for consideration and approval, before submission to the European Commission for its consideration. It is anticipated that the first funding awards under PEACE PLUS will be made during 2022.

The INTERREG VA Programme, a predecessor of the PeacePlus Programme, is managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). The eligible area for funding includes Northern Ireland, Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Cavan, Monaghan and Louth, and Western Scotland.

Match-funding is provided by both the Department of Transport in Ireland and the Department for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland to the SEUPB for three Transport-related projects under the INTERREG VA Programme. Up to 95% of Department funding is reimbursed from EU Commission via SEUPB.

The three projects funded are:

- The North West Multi-Modal Mobility Hub in Derry - This project was awarded approximately €23.5 million to develop a cross-border multi-modal hub which facilitates a shift to public transport by providing modern, integrated services such as park and ride, public cycle schemes and car share. Works were completed at the Hub in 2020 and it is fully operational;

- Development of a cross-border Greenway and cycle network - work is ongoing on the construction of the three Greenways under this project, namely:

- The Carlingford Lough Greenway, awarded almost €3.5m for the creation of over 10km of cross-border Greenway linking Newry to Carlingford;

- The North West Greenway Network, awarded €14.8m for the creation of 46.5km of cross-border Greenway; and

- The Ulster Canal Greenway which was awarded just under €5m for the creation of 22km of Greenway between Monaghan and Armagh;

- The FASTER EV Charger Project – officially launched on 9th September 2021, this project will see the installation of over 70 electric vehicle chargers in the Irish border counties, in Northern Ireland and in Western Scotland. This project has been awarded €6.4m.

## Transport Policy

115. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the amount of funding for transport projects that has been bid for and or awarded under the Connecting Europe Fund to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42068/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) is the EU's funding instrument to support projects on the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) for the programming period 2021-2027. Funding under CEF is delivered in the form of grants allocated following competitive calls for proposals. Funding rates vary depending on the call for proposals and the type of project, generally ranging from 20% to 50% of eligible costs.

The budget available for transport projects over this period is expected to be €11.3 billion, as agreed as part of the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) at European Council last July 2021. Additional funds are available to cohesion Member States which does not include Ireland.

Negotiations on a work programme for CEF for the 2021 – 2023 period are complete. The work programme, published 5 August 2021, sets out the indicative budgets and types of eligible projects that can apply for co-funding grants. The aim of publishing a 3-year work programme at this stage is to enhance predictability and transparency for stakeholders, enabling

higher quality proposals to be submitted to the EU.

My Department consulted extensively with stakeholders throughout the negotiation process to ensure the work programme is aligned as closely as possible to Ireland's needs and advocated for our position at CEF Committee, directly with other Member States, and on a bilateral basis with the European Commission.

Details of the drawdown of EU funding provided under the previous CEF programme to 2020 is not readily available by year. Further details on these projects, including all Irish CEF transport projects, are available on the website of the EU's Innovation and Networks Executive Agency at the following link:

*[ec.europa.eu/inea/sites/inea/files/cefpub/eu\\_investment\\_in\\_transport\\_in\\_ireland.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/inea/sites/inea/files/cefpub/eu_investment_in_transport_in_ireland.pdf)*

The results of a call in 2020 for funding proposals under the previous CEF programme were announced in July 2021. There were two applications from Ireland. One of these, Shannon-Foynes Port Company, was successful and was awarded over €2.3million in co-funding relating to a feasibility study which will provide the basis for a new deep water berth off of Foynes Island, which can accommodate larger vessels and meet project demand in the coming years.

The first call under the new CEF work programme will be launched this month and further applications from Ireland are expected at that stage. Finally, my Department continues to examine all funding opportunities and mechanisms to support the transport sector in Ireland.

### Aviation Industry

116. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the total amount granted or loaned to Irish airlines and aviation companies during 2020 and 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42069/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** The aviation sector is one of the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with all airlines seeing a severe depletion of revenue and facing various degrees of financial challenge. The knock-on implications for our airports have also been severe.

Government has put in place a range of supports for businesses, including the aviation sector. These supports include the wage subsidy scheme, waiving of commercial rates, deferral of tax liabilities, the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme, the Credit Guarantee Scheme, and the SBCI Working Capital Scheme. My Department has estimated that, by the end of June this year, our airlines and airports would have received at least €300 million through several of these supports.

Liquidity funding is also available through the ISIF Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund for medium and large enterprises, with Aer Lingus having received a €150 million debt facility and daa having received a €40 million participation in their bond issuance.

In November 2020, Government agreed a revised funding package of €80 million specifically for Irish aviation for 2021. €21 million is being provided under the Regional Airports Programme (2021-2025). This gives funding certainty to Donegal, Kerry and Ireland West Airport Knock and supports domestic PSO routes. €32 million is being provided to Cork and Shannon Airports through a new one-year COVID-19 Regional State Airports Programme. €26 million is being provided, through a European Commission approved Irish State Aid scheme, to compensate airport operators for the losses caused by COVID-19 and the travel restrictions imposed

by Ireland to limit its spread. The scheme will augment the supports already in place and help the industry to maintain connectivity and recover from the impact of COVID-19.

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

## Public Transport

117. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport if he will consider the trial of free public transport in Cork city and county. [42099/21]

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

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

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

Any assessment of a proposed change to public transport fare structures would be a matter for the NTA to consider in the first instance. I understand that the NTA has no plans to pilot a free public transport scheme.

## Driver Test

118. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport the current waiting time for a driving test in Raheny test centre; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42118/21]

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

This question is therefore being referred to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the

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

### **Driver Test**

119. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport the current waiting time for a driver theory test in Raheny test centre; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42119/21]

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

Test. The information requested is held by the RSA.

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

### **National Development Plan**

120. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport the amount of funding committed to under the National Development Plan for road projects that is allocated to road projects outside of Dublin; the amount that is allocated to road projects in Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42146/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for overall policy and securing capital funding in relation to the national roads programme. Once funding arrangements have been put in place with Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), under the Roads Acts 1993-2015, the planning, design and construction of individual national roads is a matter for TII, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

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

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

### **Driver Test**

121. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the fact that there are persons whose driver theory tests have been postponed at short notice on multiple occasions; if a person (details supplied) will be assured that the test will not be postponed again; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42162/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Under legislation, the Road Safety Authority (RSA) is the body responsible for the operation of the Theory Test. The protocol for scheduling appointments is an operational matter for the Road Safety Authority and the Theory Test provider.

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

## Aviation Industry

122. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport when he plans to review and publish an updated national aviation policy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42186/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The National Aviation Policy (NAP) was published in August 2015. It was followed by two progress reports published in 2016 and 2019. The principal goals of the policy are to enhance Ireland's connectivity, to foster the growth of aviation enterprise and to maximise the contribution of aviation to Ireland's sustainable economic growth and development.

These objectives remain valid but clearly much has changed since 2015 in terms of the overall challenges for the aviation sector in Ireland with a renewed focus on environmental performance and of course the Covid-19 pandemic.

Before the Covid-19 crisis, officials at the Department of Transport had commenced scoping work on a revised version of the full National Aviation Policy. This work was paused during 2020 to focus on the resilience of the aviation sector to survive the crisis. Work on a full National Aviation Policy will begin again towards the end of the year. A key part of the policy development will be a comprehensive public consultation process as well as close engagement with the aviation industry through the structures of the National Civil Aviation Development Forum.

## Legislative Programme

123. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport when he plans to publish a drone policy for Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42187/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department is in the process of developing an overarching national policy framework for unmanned aircraft systems (UAS). The aim of the policy framework is to set out the vision, strategy, and priorities for the development of the UAS sector in Ireland. The framework will guide high-level strategic planning and development of the UAS sector over the short to medium term with the aim of supporting growth and innovation in the UAS sector while managing safety, security, environmental and other aspects. This will set out a roadmap for future activity, in response to the EU regulatory requirements and to the rapidly growing drone market, dealing with aviation aspects and broader whole-of-government aspects.

A steering group to oversee the work was established in July. Membership of the steering group is drawn from primary stakeholders from relevant Government Departments and agencies to facilitate the development of a comprehensive and integrated policy. Public consultation on a draft policy framework is planned for Spring of 2022, with the aim of publishing the finalised policy framework later in 2022.

## Road Projects

124. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport if options are available in order to maintain the height of a tunnel (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on

the matter. [42193/21]

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

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

### **Driver Test**

125. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Transport the up-to-date position regarding persons seeking to apply for a learner permit and in relation to driver licences; the timeline with which the backlog can be dealt with; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42196/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** All enquires relating to driver licensing are handled by the National Driver Licence Service (NDLS), the provision of which I have delegated to the Road Safety Authority (RSA) under the relevant legislation.

I have forwarded the Deputy's query to the RSA for direct reply. If he has not heard from them in 10 working days I would ask that he contact my office directly.

### **Vehicle Registration Tax**

126. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport if he will address queries by a person (details supplied) in relation to their car tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42230/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Refunds of motor tax may be made in certain limited circumstances. However, in order to obtain a refund, there must be at least three months remaining on a motor tax disc at the time of surrender of a disc to a licensing authority (motor tax office). There is no provision for the making of a refund in respect of a period of motor taxation that has already expired.

There is a facility in place to declare a vehicle off the road where it is not going to be in use in a public place. This is underpinned by the provisions of the Non-Use of Motor Vehicles Act 2013. The primary purpose of the Act is to replace the system whereby a vehicle was declared off the road retrospectively with a system under which the vehicle must be declared off the road in advance.

The current procedures, only allowing for a future declaration of non-use, have been fully in force since 1st October 2013. Under the revised procedures, an owner can indicate that a vehicle is going to be off the road by making a declaration of non-use at any time in the last month of an existing motor tax disc or previously made declaration of non-use. The declaration can be made for any number of calendar months between 3 and 12 months i.e. it cannot be made for a period of 1 or 2 months. However, if a vehicle is subsequently required to be put back on the road, the declaration can be broken at any time simply by taxing the vehicle, either online

or through a motor tax office.

Where a declaration is not made in advance, motor tax must be paid for a minimum of 3 months, along with any arrears of motor tax, where applicable.

Motor tax legislation does not provide for exemptions in individual cases. You will appreciate the difficulties in providing for exemptions in particular cases, given that other people have had to pay arrears in motor tax where the Declaration of Non-Use of a Motor Vehicle was not made on time, and the necessity generally of maintaining a consistent approach in the application of the legislation.

### **Driver Test**

127. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport the status of a test for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42265/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** This is a matter for the Road Safety Authority. I have referred the question to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response is not received within 10 days.

### **Rail Network**

128. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Transport the terms of reference of the Strategic Rail Review which is being commissioned in cooperation with the Department for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland; the estimated timeframe for the completion of the review; the projects that will continue to be developed while this review is ongoing; the basis on which these were selected; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42269/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As the Deputy has stated my Department, in co-operation with the Department for Infrastructure Northern Ireland, has commissioned an all-island Strategic Rail Review. I can inform the Deputy that the procurement process has been completed and Arup consultants will undertake the Review on my Department's behalf. Preliminary work has recently commenced and the Review is scheduled to be completed within 12 months. The terms of reference were published on the Official Journal of the European Union as part of the procurement competition and I will separately supply the Deputy with those terms of reference as requested.

As the Deputy is aware, a revised National Development Plan is currently being finalised and that revised Plan will establish the funding parameters for investment for the coming decade and the outcomes for the rail network we will seek to achieve with that funding.

Obviously there are a range of projects already underway which will continue over the next 12 months such as –

- **National Train Control Centre** : construction will continue on the new National Train Control Centre

- **Track relaying / ballast cleaning / signalling improvements etc.:** work will continue across the network on these important aspects of protection and renewal as part of the Exchequer's €1billion commitment to the protection and renewal programme which cumulatively increases service reliability and punctuality, improves journey times and ensures continued safety of the network; and

- **New InterCity Railcars (ICRs):** these 41 carriages are under construction and scheduled for delivery in 2022

Separately to the above, in each of the five metropolitan areas work will continue over the next 12 months in relation to progressing plans for their metropolitan area rail networks and / or rail termini. This work includes –

- **Cork:** work will commence on the EU funded programme to improve rail infrastructure in the Cork metropolitan area;

- **DART+:** it is expected that, subject to Government approval, a railway order will be lodged in relation to DART+ West and a contract concluded in relation to new fleet;

- **Galway:** planning and design is continuing in relation to the proposed redevelopment of Ceannt Station and Oranmore station, while next will see a review of the current Galway Transport Strategy;

- **Limerick:** plans for the development of the metropolitan area rail network are being considered as part of the metropolitan area transport strategy which will be finalised in the coming months; and

- **Waterford:** planning and design continues in relation to the previously announced relocation of Plunkett Station, while a metropolitan area transport strategy is under development.

### **Airport Policy**

129. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Transport if he has had engagements or plans to engage with organisations (details supplied) in relation to the proposals for work practice changes namely the new ways of working proposals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42277/21]

141. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the fact that maintenance in Dublin Airport is to be outsourced to third-party contractors; if he will ensure that further privatisation of services such as cleaning and security does not occur; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42602/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 129 and 141 together.

In the first instance, the matters being referred to by the Deputy are industrial relations matters and therefore, a matter for the Company, the employees and the trade unions concerned.

In response to the severe impacts of COVID-19 on the daa, in 2020 the Company embarked on a restructuring of the business and the introduction of new work practices.

It has reached agreements on new ways of working with some 93% of staff (c. 2,100 employees). Where daa has not reached agreement with unions and staff in relation to the introduction of these new work practices, the Company has engaged with the industrial relations institutions of the State, including the Labour Court.

In this regard, I have been informed that following engagement with the Labour Court, some Unions and staff have not accepted the Labour Court recommendation regarding daa’s introduction of new work practices, and as a result, the Company advised staff in these areas that it was commencing engagement in relation to the provision of front-line maintenance services

by a third-party provider.

I have been informed that this may result in the transfer of staff and their activities to a third party, however, no final decision had been made in this regard. I am also advised that daa continues to seek engagement with the trade unions in relation to this matter.

### **Rail Network**

130. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Transport if he will advise on a matter raised in correspondence in relation to the Barrow railway bridge and the strategic rail review (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42294/21]

175. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Transport if he will address the concerns raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43193/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 130 and 175 together.

As the Deputies are aware, as Minister for Transport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The maintenance of the rail network, including ‘closed’ lines such as the Wexford to Waterford line, is a matter for Iarnród Éireann in the first instance.

As is well-known there have been no scheduled passenger services on the Wexford to Waterford line in almost 11 years at this stage. Services ceased in accordance with the applicable legislative framework and subject to an agreement between Iarnród Éireann and the National Transport Authority.

With regard to the Barrow Bridge, I am informed that Iarnród Éireann will ensure the continued functionality of the bridge through scheduled movements which will allay potential concerns that may exist as regards the permanency of the changed position. These movements will be scheduled on a quarterly basis and will be formally programmed into the Iarnród Éireann asset management computerised system. The asset management system is evidence based and allows the company demonstrate compliance with the process for audit purposes. Iarnród Éireann has confirmed that these arrangements will ensure the continued functionality of the bridge and its associated mechanisms.

The Deputies may also wish to be aware that a Strategic Rail Review has recently commenced which will examine all aspects of the inter-urban and inter-regional rail network. The Review will also provide an opportunity to reflect on the strategic potential of currently disused lines such as the Wexford to Waterford line. Uniquely this Review is being conducted on an all-island basis in full co-operation with the Northern Ireland Executive’s Department for Infrastructure with a final report due in 2022.

### **Bus Services**

131. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to allocate staff to Ennis bus station given the very high number of staycations around the county and the lack of services available to them at Ennis bus station; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42295/21]

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

I have, therefore, referred the Deputy's question to Bus Éireann for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

### **Electric Vehicles**

132. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport if an electric car charging point will be installed at a location (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42314/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Deputy will be aware that the Government is fully committed to supporting a significant expansion and modernisation of the electric vehicle charging network over the coming years. A national charging infrastructure strategy is being developed which will set out a pathway to stay ahead of demand over the critical period out to 2030. My Department has begun an engagement with relevant stakeholders to inform this work and it is envisaged that the strategy will be published later this year.

€10 million was committed from the Climate Action Fund (CAF) to support ESB investment in the charging network and this has leveraged a further €10 million investment from ESB, with the infrastructure to be in place by the end of 2022. This intervention alone will result in:

- 90 additional high power chargers, each capable of charging two vehicles
- 52 additional fast chargers, which may replace existing standard chargers
- 264 replacement standard chargers with more modern technology and with each consisting of two charge points

Further details on the progression of this project can be found at <https://esb.ie/ecars/our-network/network-upgrades>.

In light of the ESB eCars responsibility in the matter of the installation of charge points per county, I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the ESB for direct response. Please contact my Office if no reply is received within 10 working days.

In terms of existing supports for public charging, the Public Charge Point Scheme continues to be available during 2021 to provide local authorities with a grant of up to €5,000 to support the development of on-street public chargers. The primary focus of the scheme is to provide support for the installation of infrastructure which will facilitate owners of electric vehicles, who do not have access to a private parking space, but instead rely on parking their vehicles in public places near their homes to charge their EVs. My Department has committed to reviewing the Scheme in early Autumn to ensure that it is as effective as possible in driving the decarbonisation effort.

Thirteen local authorities have been in touch with SEAI in relation to the scheme which includes Kerry County Council. However as of yet, Kerry County Council has not made an official application for funding under this scheme.

### **Driver Licences**

133. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to implement a jury recommendation arising from a case (details supplied); and the date on which his Department last reviewed the criteria in the medical supervision of mentally ill patients in the context of driving vehicles and-or the application and or granting of a licence to drive a vehicle on a public road. [42379/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I have not had sight of any recommendation from the Coroner's Court on this matter. As the newspaper report supplied by the Deputy does not indicate that the jury made a specific recommendation in relation to driver licensing, the Deputy may wish to forward the text of the recommendation to me and I will consider any issues raised in relation to driving licences.

To drive a vehicle, a driver must meet strict medical standards. Driver fitness standards are developed on foot of EU law and international best practice. This includes any serious mental health conditions that might impair their ability to drive a vehicle safely (Annex 3 of EU Directive 2006/126/EU defines minimum standards of mental and physical fitness for driving).

On application for or renewal of a learner permit or driving licence, an applicant is asked a range of questions about medical conditions or disabilities that may affect their ability to drive. The response to those questions will dictate whether there is a need for medical certification by a GP to grant, refuse or impose restrictions on a licence or permit.

The Irish guidelines, Sláinte agus Tiomáint – Medical Fitness to Drive Guidelines, are reviewed and updated annually, most recently in April 2021. The information in these Guidelines is intended to assist doctors and other healthcare professionals in advising their patients on fitness to drive, requirements for reporting to the National Driver Licence Service (NDLS) and guidance on review of stability, progression or improvement in these conditions. Chapter 2 of the Guidelines specifically details the roles and responsibilities of drivers, health professionals and the NDLS.

### **Road Traffic Accidents**

134. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport if he will provide information on road traffic collisions (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42423/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I am forwarding this query to the Road Safety Authority for direct reply. If the Deputy has not received a response within 10 working days he should contact my office directly.

### **Road Traffic Accidents**

135. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport if he will provide information on road traffic collisions (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42424/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I am forwarding this query to the Road Safety Authority for direct reply. If the Deputy has not received a response within 10 working days he should contact my office directly

**Road Safety Authority**

136. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport the State about funding provided to the RSA on an annual basis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42426/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The RSA has been self-financing since 2014. The RSA normally receives no Exchequer funding, other than the €139,000 provided for pension purposes. Upon inception, the RSA inherited six pensioners that transferred to the RSA on the dissolution of the National Safety Council.

In 2021, in line with its EU obligations, Ireland is in the process of establishing an Automotive Market Surveillance Authority (AMSA). This function is being conferred on the RSA and €200,000 has been allocated in Exchequer funding for this purpose.

**Bus Services**

137. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Transport the engagement between his Department and the National Transport Authority with regard to the provision of replacement Bus Éireann route 20 services for passengers using free travel passes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42495/21]

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

While most public transport in Ireland comprises the bus and rail services funded through the National Transport Authority's (NTA) public service obligation (PSO) programme, there is part of the national public transport system that comprises non-subsidised bus services, which are run on a commercial basis by bus and coach businesses of varying sizes throughout the country. Bus Éireann operates a substantial PSO business under contract with the NTA, providing subsidised bus services outside Dublin, and in regional and rural locations throughout the country. Bus Éireann also has a separate, commercially-run business, "Expressway", which operates a number of inter-regional bus routes in competition with other, private, commercial operators in the licenced bus market.

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

Therefore, in June 2020 the Government decided to introduce new, temporary financial supports for certain licensed services provided by commercial bus operators to ensure the continued operation of these essential services. Among the commercially-operated routes that have qualified for support under the temporary scheme are most, but not all, of Bus Éireann's "Expressway" services. Notwithstanding these supports, though, the Covid situation has still had a profound impact on the company's financial situation, that the Board of the company is

obliged to address. Following extensive analysis and work within the company, the decision to consolidate its Expressway network was taken by the Board of Bus Éireann in September 2020. The decision impacts four routes - the X1 Dublin/Belfast service (which ceased operations in November 2020), the X12 Dublin/Limerick service (which ceased operations on 30/01/2021), the 20/X20 Dublin/Galway service (which ceased operations on the 28/07/2021) and the X8 Dublin/Cork service which is also due to cease operating.

In circumstances where a commercial operator ceases operating a specific route, the NTA undertakes an examination to determine whether, with the discontinuation of the commercial service, it is necessary for a replacement PSO service to be introduced to ensure no loss of connectivity to the travelling public. This process includes an assessment of the level of demand for public transport services in the affected area, an evaluation of whether existing PSO services can be reconfigured to meet any shortfall, or whether it is necessary to competitively tender for the provision of services. In light of the decision by Bus Éireann to cease operating the X20 route, the NTA completed a detailed assessment of the X20 corridor and have determined that despite Expressway's withdrawal, sufficient connectivity is provided by the remaining operators and the public service obligation is adequately met by other rail and bus services, thereby negating the need for any further intervention on the route.

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

### **Driver Test**

138. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport if he will request the RSA to retain the nursing profession as essential workers for the emergency driving test request system. [42502/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Under legislation, the Road Safety Authority (RSA) is the body responsible for the operation of the Driving Test. The scheduling of driving tests is an operational matter for the RSA, and I do not have any role in this process.

During the Covid pandemic, the driver testing service has prioritised tests for essential workers. Since May 2021, the RSA has been returning to delivering tests for all customers, while continuing to prioritise critical frontline workers who meet strict criteria for a test. This should make the overall process fairer and more transparent for all.

For this purpose, the RSA are defining a critical frontline worker as someone who works in one of the following:

- The HSE or private hospital providing health services
- the emergency services

They must also:

- need to drive as part of their job (this does not include commuting to and from their job).

### **Cycling Policy**

139. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Transport if he plans to consider

making the wearing of helmets mandatory for cyclists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42549/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Making the wearing of helmets compulsory for cyclists is an issue which has arisen a number of times over the years. It is a long-standing Government policy to recommend and promote the wearing of helmets. The Rules of the Road booklet encourages the use of cycle helmets and draws attention to their safety benefits, and the Road Safety Authority, the agency responsible for public education and awareness, strongly encourages their use.

However, opinion is divided internationally on whether the wearing of safety helmets is best achieved through the introduction of statutory requirements or through other strategies. Making the wearing of helmets compulsory would raise a number of difficulties. For example, if wearing helmets were made compulsory it would be necessary to have some kind of enforcement system with penalties, presumably fines, for cycling without a helmet. Whilst enforcement might be possible, it could create considerable strain on Garda resources, and indeed on the courts.

International studies also show that making the wearing of helmets mandatory results in a decrease in the number of people cycling.

### **Cycling Policy**

140. **Deputy Malcolm Noonan** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the increasingly hazardous conditions for cyclists on roads rural due to speeding from vehicles; the steps he will take to rectify the issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42599/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I am acutely aware of the importance of safety for our cyclists and I am very conscious of the vulnerability of cyclists on rural roads. This Department continues to work with and fund key stakeholders to address how road users behave on our roads in order to promote a safe and respectful approach from all users sharing the public road space.

In particular, the Department has recently included in the Traffic Signs Manual warning signs to inform motorists of the need to keep a safe lateral distance when overtaking cyclists. It has funded a programme for the provision of such signs by road authorities. It is also working with TII to consider suitable designs for the provision of segregated cycle facilities on higher speed roads. On quieter rural roads the general approach is to promote lower speed limits along with appropriate signage including traffic calming measures where required.

Enforcement of our road traffic laws is a matter for An Garda Síochána.

*Question No. 141 answered with Question No. 129.*

### **Cycling Policy**

142. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport the supports available to private business to encourage the increase of cycling infrastructure particularly parking for cyclists; his plans to increase this support; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42603/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** In addition to the significant increases in funding to our Active Travel infrastructure programme in 2021, my Department also supports a number of behavioural change programmes specifically aimed at encouraging employees and third level students to choose to commute via walking or cycling.

The Smarter Travel Workplaces, Smarter Travel Campus Programme, which is overseen by the National Transport Authority (NTA), is a national, voluntary, behaviour change programme that works with large employers and third level institutions to implement workplace travel plans that facilitate sustainable travel on the commute and beyond. While these travel plans are primarily focused on ‘soft’ measures such as promotion, marketing and events, they can also include some ‘hard’ measures such as cycle parking, cycle lanes, showers or lockers. The NTA plans to build on the current Programme by expanding the number of businesses and organisations engaged in the Programme in order to encourage as many employees as possible to consider sustainable transport modes such as cycling in their commute to and from work.

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

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

### Legislative Measures

143. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Transport the status of his plans to legislate for e-scooters; the expected timeline for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42629/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My intention is to legislate for e-scooters, in accordance with the Programme for Government. Department officials have drafted the necessary changes to primary legislation as part of the forthcoming Road Traffic Bill. The Bill has completed pre-legislative scrutiny and is expected to come before the Oireachtas in the coming months.

When the Bill is enacted, it will give the Minister for Transport powers to make regulations for the use of e-scooters and other powered personal transporters.

### Road Safety

144. **Deputy Malcolm Noonan** asked the Minister for Transport his views on whether the wearing of protective clothing and head gear when using bicycles, e-scooters and skateboards will be made mandatory; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42630/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Making the wearing of protective clothing and helmets compulsory for cyclists is an issue which has

arisen a number of times over the years. It is a long standing Government policy to recommend and promote the wearing of helmets. The Rules of the Road booklet encourages the use of cycle helmets and draws attention to their safety benefits, and the Road Safety Authority, the agency responsible for public education and awareness, strongly encourages their use.

To create a statutory obligation on the wearing of reflective clothing would entail making it a criminal offence under Road Traffic legislation for any person guilty of not wearing high visibility clothing. A person in breach of such a provision would fall to be issued with a fixed charge notice or summonsed to court, depending on what procedure would be put in place for the processing of such offences.

I believe that the wearing of such clothing is best pursued by way of educational and publicity campaigns rather than by pursuing a punitive approach to the issue. In this regard, the Road Safety Authority (RSA), which has responsibility for the promotion of road safety awareness, advertising and the dissemination of road safety information, undertakes a number of campaigns to promote awareness among pedestrians and cyclists of the need for visibility on our roads.

International evidence is that mandatory helmet legislation acts as a major disincentive to cycling such that the net impact of the legislation on public health is significantly negative. Therefore I do not propose to introduce such legislation.

### **Dublin Bus**

145. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Transport his plans in his capacity as shareholder and the implementation date for a new pension plan for employees of Dublin Bus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42635/21]

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

The CIÉ Group has two pension schemes, namely the Regular Wages Scheme (“RWS”) and 1951 superannuation scheme (“1951 Scheme”).

In relation to the Regular Wages Scheme, CIÉ has prepared and submitted draft Statutory Instruments (SIs) to give effect to the proposed changes to the scheme. There are a number of steps involved before an SI can be made, including the statutory consultation process.

Concerning the 1951 scheme, members of the scheme were balloted regarding the Labour Court Recommendation which emerged on 23rd November 2020, with a majority voting to accept the proposals. CIÉ has recently prepared and submitted a consolidated draft Statutory Instrument to give effect to the proposed changes to the scheme - this is now being considered by my Department in conjunction with NewERA.

### **Road Network**

146. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the fact that a recent assessment estimated that Wexford County Council requires €196 million to bring secondary roads in the county up to standard; his plans to address this urgent issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42682/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The improvement and maintenance of re-

gional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of each local authority, in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from local authorities' own resources supplemented by State road grants, where applicable.

There were major cutbacks in funding for the road network in general during the post 2008 recession. As a result there is a backlog of road repair works in all local authority jurisdictions across the country. The National Development Plan (NDP), as it stands, provides for a gradual increase in funding for regional and local roads and there has been a significant increase in Exchequer funding particularly in the last four years. In this context, Wexford County Council received a total allocation of €18,569,130 for 2021 which is an increase of 59% when compared to 2017. In addition, in June this year I announced the details of a €17.3 million investment package for climate adaptation works on regional and local roads with a view to making the network more resilient. Wexford County Council received an allocation of €650,830 under the Climate Adaptation and Resilience Works programme.

Funding is not yet at the level needed for the adequate maintenance and renewal of regional and local roads and so for this reason, the primary focus for capital investment continues to be the maintenance and renewal of the network with some limited investment in road improvement projects. Within the budget available to the Department, funding is allocated on as fair and equitable a basis as possible to eligible local authorities. In this context, grants in the main grant categories are allocated based on the length of the road network within a local authority's area of responsibility with some account taken of traffic.

It should be noted that exchequer funding for regional and local roads is intended to supplement realistic contributions from local authorities' own resources. As the statutory road authorities for their areas, it is open to local authorities to reprioritise investment towards regional and local roads.

### **Departmental Staff**

147. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Transport the steps being taken to facilitate remote working within his Department in particular to encourage remote working for those who live in the regions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42716/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department has robustly facilitated remote working for staff in roles across all office locations, where feasible, over the last 18 months. We have been particularly conscious of the need to minimise the pressure on the public transport system to support essential workers travelling safely. This has included the supply of IT equipment to enable an effective and productive working environment at home for our people. Departments and Offices are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. With restrictions now lifting, there are extensive plans being implemented to enable staff to transition to a mix of working together in the office while maintaining an element of working from home, gradually and safely, until a blended working scheme is in place.

A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

My Department will develop its own Blended Working arrangements in line with the central

policy framework. Officers of the Department in all office locations will be invited to apply once these arrangements have been finalised.

### **Driver Test**

148. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Transport the current wait-time for driver tests in locations (details supplied); the number of persons who are currently waiting to be tested; when this backlog will be addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42720/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Under legislation, the Road Safety Authority (RSA) is the body responsible for the operation of the Driving Test. Specific details on individual test centres are held by the Road Safety Authority. I have therefore referred this part of the question to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

I can assure the Deputy that the Department is very aware of the challenges facing the RSA as they work hard to further manage the backlog in the Driver Testing Service.

Since last October, the driver testing service has been prioritising essential workers. Since May 2021, the RSA has been returning to delivering tests for all customers, while continuing to prioritise critical frontline workers. This means, in the interest of fairness, the RSA targeted test appointments to those waiting longest who are ready and eligible to take the test.

The service continues to operate under restrictions in the interest of making it safe while there is an ongoing presence of Covid.

In order to deal with the backlog, the RSA received sanction to hire 40 new temporary testers, in addition to 36 they were sanctioned to retain or rehire in 2020. These new testers have completed their training and are now conducting live tests since July 2021. Sanction has also been granted to recruit a further 40 testers and the process has commenced.

An extra 10 temporary test centres have been opened (and are effectively an expansion of existing locations or replacing unsuitable locations), and a further 9 locations have been expanded within the existing premises, to accommodate more testers.

Other measures being taken include increasing the number of tests carried out per tester per day as well as additional opening hours.

### **Driver Test**

149. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Transport the information that must be supplied to the RSA for a driver test applicant to confirm that they are a critical frontline worker; if the information supplied is verified or checked by the RSA; the way the RSA then treat this information under GDPR; the legislation that underpins the right of the RSA to request such personal information from driver test applicants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42721/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Under legislation, the Road Safety Authority (RSA) is the body responsible for the operation of the Driving Test. This is an operational matter for the RSA. I have therefore referred this question to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has

not been received within ten days.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

150. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport the way in which his Department and public bodies and agencies under his remit are accommodating requests for persons to work from home. [42766/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department has robustly facilitated remote working for staff in roles across all office locations, where feasible, over the last 18 months. We have been particularly conscious of the need to minimise the pressure on the public transport system to support essential workers travelling safely. This has included the supply of IT equipment to enable the majority of Departmental staff to work effectively and productively at home. Departments and Offices are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. With restrictions now lifting, there are extensive plans being implemented to enable staff to transition to a mix of working together in the office while maintaining an element of working from home, gradually and safely, until a blended working scheme is in place

A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

My Department will develop its own Blended Working arrangements in line with the central policy framework. Officers of the Department will be invited to apply once these arrangements have been finalised.

I have asked the aegis bodies to respond directly to you on this matter. If you do not hear from them within 10 days, you should contact my office.

### **Driver Test**

151. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport if he will extend the motorbike initial basic training certificate to all persons who could not take their driver test due to restrictions and cancellations by the RSA. [42808/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** The Road Safety Authority and the Department of Transport announced a further extension to certificates for motorcycle Initial Basic Training (IBT), in order to take account of the impact of the pandemic.

The extension is being made depending on when an IBT cert was issued, with three groupings as follows –

(a) an IBT certificate issued during the period beginning on 01 March 2018 and ending on 30 June 2018 is valid until 01 October 2021,

(b) an IBT certificate issued during the period beginning on 01 July 2018 and ending on 31 August 2018 is valid for a period of 3 years and 2 months from the date of issue, and

(c) an IBT certificate issued during the period beginning on 01 September 2018 and ending on 30 June 2019 is valid for a period of 3 years from the date of issue.

By way of example:

If a person received an IBT cert on 19 of March 2018 it would have expired on 19 March 2020 but will now be valid until 1 October 2021;

If a person received an IBT cert on 15 July 2018 it would have expired on 15 July 2020 but will now be valid until 15 September 2021;

If a person received an IBT cert on 10 February 2019, it would have expired on 10 February 2021 but will now be valid until 10 February 2022.

No further extensions are being considered at this time.

### **Driver Test**

152. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport if he will ensure asylum seekers are permitted to apply for a driver licence. [42809/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** In line with the Programme for Government, the Department is committed to providing access to the driving licence system to asylum seekers.

As Irish driving licence legislation is based on a framework of EU law, consideration must be given to the relevant EU Directives. While the legislative requirements are being examined, work is continuing on the administrative and technical solutions needed in conjunction with the Road Safety Authority and the Department of Justice to address the Programme for Government commitment.

### **Transport Policy**

153. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to introduce regulations for e-scooters. [42810/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** My Department is committed to decarbonising the transport sector by encouraging modal shift away from travel by private car towards less carbon-intensive and more sustainable alternatives. Micro-mobility options like e-scooters have an important role to play in this transition to a cleaner and greener society and economy. The Deputy will be aware that the forthcoming Road Traffic Bill includes provisions to allow for the development of e-scooter regulations accordingly.

The Bill will define a new category of vehicle in the Road Traffic Act 1961 called “powered personal transporters” or ‘PPTs’, which will include e-scooters, and amend the current definition for mechanically propelled vehicles (MPVs) to remove PPTs from its scope. Establishing this new category will enable us to subsequently set out appropriate technical and safety standards and rules for the use of e-scooters in secondary legislation, without the same need for registration, licencing and taxation associated with MPVs.

The preparatory work to draft these technical Regulations has already commenced. Earlier

this year, my Department undertook a comprehensive consultation process with key stakeholders to inform the development of these Regulations, including the Road Safety Authority, the National Transport Authority, An Garda Síochána, Local Government and representation from a range of industry, advocacy and accessibility groups. My Department will consider these submissions, in tandem with the learnings from the introduction of e-scooters in other jurisdictions, to ensure that we can foster a supportive environment for micro-mobility vehicles while tackling the implementation challenges associated with innovative modes of travel. It should be noted that maintaining the highest standards of road safety, particularly for the most vulnerable road users, will continue to be a priority for my Department.

It is expected that the Bill will shortly be introduced in the Dáil with a view to finalisation and commencement before the end of this year.

### **Driver Test**

154. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport the status of an application for a driver test for a person who requires a licence for work (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42811/21]

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

Individual appointments are a matter for the RSA and I do not have any role in this process. This question is therefore being referred to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

### **Cycling Facilities**

155. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Transport if there are any powers in place or under consideration which would require that premises which are open to the public would have designated safe parking for cyclists. [42818/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I very much agree that the provision of secure cycle parking is important to support the development of cycling as a sustainable transport choice and I am also aware that a lack of secure cycle parking is cited as a barrier for cycling and bike ownership. Requirements in relation to the provision of cycle parking in public areas fall under the remit of the various local authorities, who issue standards and guidance on this matter; my Department is responsible for the provision of funding and policy direction in relation to such issues.

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

It is also worth noting that the Smarter Travel Workplaces, Smarter Travel Campus Programme, which is overseen by the National Transport Authority (NTA), is a national, voluntary, behaviour change programme that works with large employers and third level institutions to

implement workplace travel plans that facilitate sustainable travel on the commute and beyond. These partners could include premises which are open to the public.

While these travel plans are primarily focused on ‘soft’ measures such as promotion, marketing and events, they can also include some ‘hard’ measures such as cycle parking, cycle lanes, showers or lockers. The NTA plans to build on the current Programme by expanding the number of businesses and organisations engaged in the Programme in order to encourage as many employees and customers/clients as possible to consider sustainable transport modes such as cycling in their travel to and from the premises.

### **Cycling Facilities**

156. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Transport if he will bring forward initiatives to encourage shopping centres and businesses to provide bicycle parking; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42832/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The provision of secure cycle parking is important to support the development of cycling as a sustainable transport choice, as the lack of same is often cited as a barrier to cycling and bike ownership. Requirements in relation to the provision of cycle parking in public areas fall under the remit of the various local authorities, who issue standards and guidance on this matter; my Department is responsible for the provision of funding and policy direction in relation to such issues.

The issue of facilitating and encouraging Active Travel across the general public will be a key priority in the context of my Department’s review of Sustainable Mobility Policy, which is currently ongoing. The issue of cycle parking is being considered as part of this exercise. I intend that the new policy framework will provide a strategic backdrop to the increased investment planned by this Government across the sustainable mobility programme, including Active Travel, and I look forward to the completion of this important work in 2021.

It is also worth noting that the Smarter Travel Workplaces, Smarter Travel Campus Programme, which is overseen by the National Transport Authority (NTA), is a national, voluntary, behaviour change programme that works with businesses and third level institutions to implement workplace travel plans that facilitate sustainable travel on the commute and beyond.

While these travel plans are primarily focused on ‘soft’ measures such as promotion, marketing and events, they can also include some ‘hard’ measures such as cycle parking, cycle lanes, showers or lockers. The NTA plans to build on the current Programme by expanding the number of businesses and organisations engaged in the Programme in order to encourage as many employees and customers/clients as possible to consider sustainable transport modes such as cycling in their travel to and from their premises.

### **Rail Network**

157. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the lift at Howth Junction and Donaghmede railway station which allows access for persons with limited mobility is out of order; the steps he is taking to address this and prevent this happening again; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42845/21]

158. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the lift at Clontarf Road railway station which allows access for persons

with limited mobility is out of order; the steps he is taking to address this and prevent this happening again; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42846/21]

**165. Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will ensure that lifts at Irish Rail stations are operational given that there has been a number of instances of lifts being non-operational for weeks at a time, denying access to persons with limited mobility; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42896/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 157, 158 and 165 together.

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

Irish Rail has developed a 5-year programme, involving upgrades, renewals and improved maintenance strategies for its lifts and escalators which will provide direct benefits to customers through improved reliability and availability of lifts and escalator assets. Subject to funding, lifts in 52 stations across the rail network are earmarked for investment up to 2024. The intent of this programme is to renew and replace life-expired lifts and lifts in poor condition, to ensure the reliability and availability of lift access.

In 2020 the National Transport Authority (NTA) established a rail lift refurbishment/replacement programme, under the Capital Programme, with a €3.3m ring fenced allocation. A major part of the programme in 2020 was the upgrading of lifts at 12 stations in the Dublin Suburban area. For 2021, €3.84m was originally ring-fenced by the NTA from the Capital Programme to the Lift and Escalator Renewal Programme. An additional €2m was allocated to the Programme in November 2020, as part of Budget 2021, bringing the total allocated to the Lifts and Escalator Renewal Programme to €5.84m this year. The additional allocation will enable the acceleration of the delivery of the 5-year programme.

I have also referred the Deputy’s question to Irish Rail for direct reply in relation to the specific stations mentioned. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

*Question No. 158 answered with Question No. 157.*

### **Driver Test**

**159. Deputy Richard O’Donoghue** asked the Minister for Transport if he will provide a timetable for clearing the backlog in driving test waiting times due to the easing of restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42853/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Covid-19 has had on profound effect on the delivery of the Road Safety Authority’s driver testing services resulting in a significant backlog.

Due to suspension of driver testing services in the first 2020 lockdown, along with the health protocols since resumption of service and the further curtailing of services during subsequent level 5 restrictions, a significant backlog has developed.

Since last October, the driver testing service has been prioritising essential workers. Since May 2021, the RSA has been returning to delivering tests for all customers, while continuing to prioritise critical frontline workers. This means, in the interest of fairness, the RSA targeted test

appointments to those waiting longest who are ready and eligible to take the test. The number of tests being offered weekly

continues to grow

The service continues to operate under restrictions in the interest of making it safe while there is an ongoing presence of Covid. Given the necessity for a tester to be in close proximity to a test candidate, and to get into vehicles brought by the candidates which are therefore not a controlled environment, this places limits on the capacity of the test service.

When the service resumed in June 2020, testers were conducting 5 tests each per day, as against 8 before the pandemic. This increased to 6 tests from 14 September 2020. The RSA is looking to increase the number of tests to 7 per tester per day from late September 2021, subject to compliance with health protocols.

In order to deal with the backlog, the RSA received sanction to hire 40 new temporary testers, in addition to 36 they were sanctioned to retain or rehire in 2020. These new testers have completed their training and are now conducting live tests since July 2021. Sanction has also been granted to recruit a further 40 testers and the process has commenced.

An extra 10 temporary test centres have been opened (and are effectively an expansion of existing locations or replacing unsuitable locations), and a further 9 locations have been expanded within the existing premises, to accommodate more testers.

The Government will continue to be guided by public health advice on the safe provision of services and, in conjunction with the RSA, continues to keep the situation under review to ensure that every possible measure is being put in place so that the maximum number of customers can be served, while adhering to public health requirements.

### **Driver Test**

160. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport when a driver test is expected for a person (details supplied). [42860/21]

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

Individual cases are a matter for the RSA and I do not have any role in this process.

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

### **Driver Licences**

161. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport when a driver licence renewal may be expected to be processed for a person (details supplied). [42861/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** All enquires relating to driver licensing are handled by the National Driver Licence Service, the provision of which I have delegated to the Road Safety Authority under the relevant legislation. My Department does not have access to individual applications.

## Driver Test

162. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Transport if a driver test can be expedited for a person (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42864/21]

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

Individual cases are a matter for the RSA and I do not have any role in this process.

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

## Electric Vehicles

163. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Transport the number and value of electric vehicle grants provided over the past five years by hybrid and fully electric, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42877/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Providing a sustainable, low-carbon transport system is a key priority of my Department. The Programme for Government commits to 7% average annual emissions reduction to 2030; ultimately, the goal is for a zero-emission mobility system by 2050. The national car and van fleet accounts for almost 60% of all land transport emissions, and so a transition to low emissions vehicles, including

EVs, is a necessary step-change to effect a substantial reduction in transport emissions.

An overview of the number and value of EV grants provided over the past five years by hybrid and fully electric is set out in the following table:

-	BEV	BEV	PHEV	PHEV	Yearly Total (BEV + PHEV)	Yearly Total (BEV + PHEV)	Actual Spend
	Number	Value	Number	Value	Number	Value	
2016	353	€1,711,000	278	€1,294,000	631	€3,005,000	€3,038,800
2017	626	€2,980,000	358	€1,653,200	984	€4,633,200	€4,262,000
2018	1907	€8,577,400	879	€4,191,000	2786	€12,768,400	€9,133,600
2019	3318	€14,791,200	1410	€6,810,000	4728	€21,601,200	€20,833,800
2020	2654	€12,901,600	2231	€11,007,400	4885	€23,909,000	€23,511,800
2021	3372	€16,153,200	4356	€20,971,800	7728	€37,125,000	€42,531,400
Total	12230	€57,114,400	9512	€45,927,400	21,742	€103,041,800	€103,311,400

It should be noted that the numbers and values for 2021 are correct as of 31/08/2021.

In addition, the EV Purchase Grant Scheme has recently been updated to support the most efficient and environmentally friendly vehicles on the market. Support in the form of government funding is being refocused to prioritise battery electric cars. Grants for these EVs continue at a rate of €5000. From the 1st of July 2021, the value of the purchase grant for PHEVs changed from €5,000 to €2,500. It is likely that the signalling of this change contributed to an increase in PHEV applications in the first half of this year which is reflected in the above table.

The SEAI grant scheme aims to encourage behavioural change and support the Government's commitment to achieving a 51% reduction in transport emissions by 2030. The grant schemes are kept under continuous review to ensure that they are as effective as possible in

driving the decarbonisation effort. The update to the scheme is in line with the wider policy approach being taken by other EU Member States due to the increasing recognition that PHEV emissions in the ‘real world’ are often higher than ‘official’ emission levels.

### **Telecommunications Services**

164. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Transport the measures being taken to address the recent increase in the number of scam phone calls; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42892/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I wish to advise the Deputy that issues relating to scam calls do not fall under the remit of the Department of Transport.

I understand that this is an operational matter for private telecommunication companies and the Communications Regulator, ComReg.

*Question No. 165 answered with Question No. 157.*

### **Government Communications**

166. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Transport if his Ministerial phones have been hacked or attempted to be hacked during the term of office.. [42935/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Neither I, nor my Departmental officials, are aware of any occasion during my term in office where my Ministerial phones have been hacked, or of any instance of an attempted hack.

### **Government Communications**

167. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Transport if he has ever used his personal phones for Government business; and if so, if the personal phones have been hacked during his term of office. [42953/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** In addition to my Ministerial work phone, I can confirm that I have used my personal phone for Government business. My personal phone is equipped with a secure work container, which was installed on the device by my Department’s IT team, providing me with access to my Departmental emails and Ministerial calendar.

Neither I nor my Departmental officials are aware of any occasion during my term in office where my personal phone has been hacked, or of any instance of an attempted hack.

### **Freedom of Information**

168. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Transport the number of freedom of information requests responded to by his Department in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; the number of responses that included documents related to text messages and other phone message communications such as messages sent through an application (details supplied) in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42975/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Access to information helps the public to understand decisions made and allows public debate to be better informed and more productive. The Freedom of Information process, supported by the relevant legislation, is a key part of this and is a priority for my Department.

The Department has responded to 2,033 FOI requests from 2016 to date. The year-by-year breakdown is set out in the below table:

2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021 to date
302	344	390	511	324	162

While my department does not keep a separate record of how many requests would have telephonic or mobile application records, I can confirm that FOI Decision Makers are aware and clear that this type of information is to be fully considered in terms of FOI requests received.

### Road Safety Authority

169. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding the treatment of lorry drivers by the RSA; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42983/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** Under the Road Safety Authority Act 2006 (Conferral of Functions) Order 2006 (S.I. No. 477 of 2006), the Road Safety Authority (RSA) has responsibility for the operation, oversight, development, quality assurance and delivery of commercial vehicle roadworthiness testing arrangements.

The RSA carries out bilateral roadside inspections in conjunction with An Garda Síochána (AGS). Multiagency roadside operations are normally RSA, AGS, Customs (Revenue), Health & Safety Authority (HSA) and Social Protection. The RSA do not carry out roadside operations unless AGS are present. Questions in relation to Garda operations should be addressed to my colleague the Minister for Justice.

As the RSA are the responsible body, I have forwarded this question to them for direct reply to the Deputy in relation to their role. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

### Commissions of Investigation

170. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Transport the cost of each commission of investigation under the remit of his Department over the preceding decade. [43000/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Commissions of Investigation Act 2004 provides for the establishment of Commissions of Investigation which can investigate matters of significant public concern.

While the Department undertakes certain investigations as part of its various functions and responsibilities, no Commissions of Investigation under the Act of 2004 have been established under the remit of my Department over the last decade and no costs have been incurred.

### Ministerial Appointments

171. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Transport the number of formal and informal roles held by a person (details supplied) in the name of his Department or associated agency in the lifetime of this Government; when they were appointed to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43045/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The person in question has not held any roles, formal or informal, in the name of my Department in the lifetime of this Government.

I have referred your question to the agencies under the aegis of my Department for direct reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

### **Public Transport**

172. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Transport the details in relation to tax saver commuter cards for part-time workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43046/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport, nor decisions on fares.

Following the establishment of the National Transport Authority (NTA) in December 2009, the NTA has responsibility for the regulation of fares charged to passengers in respect of public transport services, provided under public service obligation (PSO) contracts.

In relation to the possible introduction of alternative tax saver commuter ticket options following the Covid pandemic, the NTA is currently evaluating such a proposal and my Department recently commenced discussions with the NTA and the Department of Finance. The NTA is proceeding with the detailed technical work associated with introduction of a more flexible Tax saver product, whilst discussions with the Department of Finance continue.

### **Road Safety**

173. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport if advice will be provided on a matter in relation to certification for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43047/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** This is a matter for the Road Safety Authority. I have referred the question to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response is not received within 10 days.

### **Government Communications**

174. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport if he and or his special advisors and or officials use or have used services (details supplied) to communicate in the past 18 months. [43081/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department does not subscribe to either of the specified services and no official internal communication takes place on these applications.

However, I confirm that accounts with both services were created on my behalf, to facilitate Green Party rather than Departmental business. The use of one of the specified services pre-dates my appointment as Minister, and I have not used the application for any Department or Government business since my appointment. I can also confirm advisers have used these services for Green Party business.

*Question No. 175 answered with Question No. 130.*

### **Tax Reliefs**

176. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Finance if he has had discussions with the Minister for Health in relation to tax relief being extended to counselling and psychotherapy as a qualifying health expense and the application of VAT exemption now rated at 13.5% on earnings over €37,500 for counsellors and psychotherapists. [43172/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Section 469 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 provides for tax relief in respect of qualifying health expenses. Section 469 defines “health expenses” as “expenses in respect of the provision of health care including the services of a practitioner”.

A practitioner is defined in the section as “any person who is:

1. registered in the register established under section 43 of the Medical Practitioners Act 2007,
2. registered in the register established under section 26 of the Dentists Act, 1985, or,
3. in relation to health care provided outside the State, entitled under the laws of the country in which the care is provided to practice medicine or dentistry there”.

In the case of counselling or psychotherapy, the relief is available where the counsellor, psychologist or psychotherapist carrying out the treatment is a qualified practitioner, or where a patient is referred by a qualified practitioner for a diagnostic procedure.

This is similar to the position that applies to other medical expenses, and I am satisfied that the legislation provides sufficient flexibility for expenses that should qualify for tax relief. Accordingly, there are no plans to change these arrangements at this time.

Comprehensive guidance material on medical expenses can be found on Revenue’s website in Tax and Duty Manual Part 15-01-12 <https://www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-15/15-01-12.pdf>

With regards to the application of VAT exemption now rated at 13.5% on earnings over €37,500 for counsellors and psychotherapists, the VAT rating of goods and services is subject to the requirements of EU VAT law, with which Irish VAT law must comply. Under domestic legislation, professional medical care services recognised as such by the Department of Health are exempt from VAT. Professional medical care services recognised by the Department of Health are generally those medical care services supplied by health professionals who are enrolled, registered, regulated, or designated on the appropriate statutory register provided for under the relevant legislation in force in the State or equivalent legislation applicable in other countries. This includes health professionals registered under the Medical Practitioners Act 2007, the Nurses Act 1985 and those engaged in a regulated profession designated under Section 4 of the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005.

Statutory Instrument No. 170 of 2018 (Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (Regulations 2018) of 2 July 2018 designates psychotherapists and counsellors as a regulated profession and established the Counsellors and Psychotherapists Registration Board. Professional counselling and psychotherapy services provided by persons registered by this Board are exempt from VAT from the date of their registration.

The thirteen members of the Counsellors and Psychotherapists Registration Board were appointed with effect from 25 February 2019.

The Board has begun the substantial body of work which must be undertaken before it is in a position to open its registers. Questions on the establishment of the Counsellors and Psychotherapists Registration Board and their progress in opening their register are a matter for the Minister for Health.

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

177. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Finance if he will examine the situation in which a company (details supplied) reported to have informed prospective buyers in a development that their contracting Covid-19, receiving the PUP and being unable to draw down their mortgage would see them forfeit their deposit which, in the case of a person who felt they had to withdraw from the purchase would have been in excess of €36,000; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41547/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I have a functional responsibility for the regulatory framework governing the provision of residential mortgage credit to consumers by Central Bank regulated entities. However, I do not have a functional role in the regulation of contracts for the purchase and sale of residential property. The terms of such contracts which are entered into by the purchasers and sellers of residential property, including the issue of a purchase deposit and the circumstances relating to such a deposit if the purchase/sale of a property is not completed, are contractual matters for the parties entering into the purchase/sale of the property. However, house purchasers usually engage the services of a legal practitioner in relation to the conveyancing requirements associated with the purchase of a residential property and it will be the responsibility of the legal practitioner to advise and represent his/her client in such conveyancing and contractual matters including, as necessary, in relation to any particular requirements or conditions in a mortgage offer that the purchaser will need to be taken into consideration where the purchaser is availing of mortgage finance to purchase the residential property.

In relation to the mortgage aspects of the question, the Central Bank has advised that it expects all regulated firms to take a consumer-focused approach and to act in their customers' best interests at all times, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also indicated that regulated lenders continue to process mortgage applications and have supports in place to assist customers impacted by COVID-19. If mortgage applicants have any queries or concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on their mortgage application, they should contact their lender directly. However, within the parameters of the regulatory framework, the decision to grant or refuse an individual application for mortgage credit, and/or the conditions which may attach to a mortgage offer, is ultimately a business and commercial decision to be made by the regulated entity and I cannot become involved in such matters.

### **Currency Exchange**

178. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance if he and or the Revenue Commissioners have evaluated the potential for tax liability concealment and or avoidance as a consequence of the use of the various different types of crypto-asset and or cryptocurrency transactions. [41552/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by the Office of the Revenue Commissioners that Revenue operate a risk-based compliance framework, using advanced analytics in a Risk Evaluation Analysis and Profiling (REAP) system to detect non-compliant behaviour. Risks in relation to crypto assets are included in Revenue's compliance framework. This analytical approach to taxpayer behaviour and risk is continuously evolving and being enhanced in line with current developments.

Ireland operates a self-assessment tax system. The receipt of crypto assets as a form of payment for services or goods rendered will give rise to Income Tax for individuals or Corporation Tax for corporate taxpayers. Value Added Tax (VAT) on the Euro equivalent value of the crypto asset when received should also be considered, if applicable, to the receipt of these assets as a form of payment. The disposal of crypto assets is treated in the same manner as the disposal of all assets for Capital Gains Tax purposes. There are no special rules in Ireland for the tax treatment of crypto assets.

Under the Taxes Consolidation Act, Revenue have the power to obtain information on crypto asset or cryptocurrency transactions, as is the case for other transactions, where there is reason to believe the transaction is relevant to tax. These powers include obtaining information from the taxpayer, from a financial institution or from any other third party who holds relevant information.

The European Commission is expected to publish a proposal on exchange of information in respect to crypto-assets before the end of 2021. This will be the eighth iteration of the Directive on Administrative Cooperation (DAC) and will be referred to as "DAC8". We understand that the purpose of DAC8 will be to ensure that EU tax transparency rules keep pace with the evolving economy including in respect to crypto assets and e-money.

The OECD is also anticipated to release a recommended policy framework for crypto-assets reporting standards in the upcoming months. This framework will further strengthen the cohesive approach under the Common Reporting Standards ("CRS") which calls on jurisdictions to obtain, on an annual basis, information from financial institutions and exchange that information with other jurisdictions.

Ireland actively contributes to the ongoing work at both EU and OECD levels to develop tax reporting frameworks that will provide information to tax authorities on transactions involving crypto-assets and e-money and has also been engaged in work to better understand how such transactions are treated for tax purposes in different jurisdictions.

### **Departmental Staff**

179. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Finance the current policy regarding the employment of persons with disabilities in his Department and in each State and semi-State body under the aegis of his Department; the disability quota of his Department at present; if there is an active campaign to increase the disability workforce from the current target of 3% to a minimum of 6% by 2024; if this quota has now been exceeded; if so, the details of same; if there has been an advertised competition in relation to the quota; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41593/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** During the years 2015 to 2020 inclusive, my Department satisfied the 3% target of employing staff with disabilities. My Department is aware of the increase in the target to 6% and is committed to achieving this revised target by 2024. The following table sets out the percentage of employees with a disability for the years 2015 to 2020. The 2020 figure was taken from a census survey conducted in March 2021 and is deemed the current percentage figure for my Department.

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Percentage	4.9%	3.0%	4.1%	4.1%	5.14%	4.38%

All recruitment into my Department from outside the Civil Service is conducted through the Public Appointments Service (PAS). As such, my Department does not directly determine the level of access to employment for persons with disabilities. Where my Department recruits internally or through the Civil Service Mobility Scheme, this is conducted in accordance with the Code of Practice published by the Commission for Public Service Appointments (CPSA). The Code of Practice reflects the following core principles:

- Probity
- Appointments are made on merit
- An appointments process in line with best practice
- A fair appointments process applied with consistency
- Appointments are made in an open, accountable and transparent manner

Furthermore, my Department has recently rolled out Diversity 3.0 Workshops to all staff and has aimed to ensure all staff have undertaken this programme. During 2016 and 2017, a major refurbishment project was undertaken by the Office of Public Works in my Department in Government Buildings on Merrion Street. As part of that project, electronic doors were installed to assist the movement of staff across the campus. In 2019, an external lift was installed in the main block to allow staff with mobility difficulties to access the building more easily.

My Department adheres to its requirements as set out by the Disability Act of 2005. It has a Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) who works closely with the National Disability Authority (NDA) to ensure that the Department is fully compliant with its obligations under the Act. Bi-monthly DLO Network meetings are held to share knowledge and assist other DLOs across the Civil Service, as well as engaging with staff in accessing training and learning events. My Department has also held awareness presentations in the areas of Autism and Dyslexia in the Workplace and has marked International Day of People with Disabilities and it is proposed to continue to do so.

My Department's website, intranet and Build to Share programmes all have software to aid the visually impaired. A 'loop system' is in place in my Department's main conference room for staff and visitors with hearing loss.

The position in relation to bodies under the aegis of my Department with direct employees is set out below.

The Central Bank of Ireland is committed to attracting and retaining people with disabilities and has various actions in place to support this. It gathers data on disability in the workplace via an annual employee survey; 2.7% of respondents to end-2020 disclosed that they had a disability. This equates to 1.45% of the total workforce at that time. The Central Bank is considering ways in which it can increase disclosure rates to build a more accurate profile. In addition, the Bank

is currently considering, via a cross-functional Disability Taskforce, what further actions are needed to increase the number of employees with disabilities taking into account the legislative target of 3% and the 6% target outlined in the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities. The Bank has participated in recent years in work experience programmes designed specifically for people with disabilities including the Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) work placement programme run by the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) and placements via the National Council for the Blind of Ireland. Working with WAM, the Central Bank ring-fences roles, typically two, in its annual Graduate Programme for graduates with disabilities. The Bank also attends AHEAD's Annual Careers Fair. Across all of its recruitment campaigns, the Central Bank highlights that it welcomes diverse candidates and is an equal opportunities employer. It provides reasonable accommodations throughout every stage of the recruitment process. The Bank aims to provide an accessible physical environment which supports the attraction and retention of people with disabilities. Its headquarters in North Wall Quay has won national and international awards for its universal design and accessibility. Over one hundred specific recommendations were integrated into the design, from large "smart" lifts with good signage, clear controls, light floor finishes, and contrasting handrails to half-height mirrors. A variety of supports are provided to colleagues with disabilities as required, including ergonomic and accessibility assessments, personal emergency evacuation planning, 'buddy' training, assistive technologies such as voice activated software and other equipment or awareness training. The Central Bank has an Access Officer to provide a central point of contact for staff and the public, as well as to promote awareness across all activities and services. It has an active employee led network (Bankability Network), the aim of which is to ensure a strong and supportive network for colleagues impacted by disability and to raise awareness among all staff. Amongst other activities, the network hosts regular events which are open to all staff to attend with inspiring speakers on various topics relating to disability in the workplace. Disability awareness training is also provided to frontline staff and to those providing services to the public. The Central Bank provides staffing to the Investor Compensation Company DAC which is also a body under my Department's remit.

The Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO) fully recognises its obligations and responsibilities with regard to the Employment Equality Acts 1998-2015 and Disability Act 2005, and is committed to enabling access to employment for persons with disabilities. The FSPO operates its recruitment campaigns in compliance with the Codes of Practice for Appointment to Positions in the Civil Service and Public Service and is committed to a policy of equal opportunity for prospective candidates. It encourages applications under all nine grounds of the Employment Equality Acts and offers reasonable accommodation to current and prospective employees with disabilities, in accordance with the Acts. A staff census undertaken in 2020 indicated that, at 8.23%, the FSPO exceeded the minimum requirement set out in the Disability Act 2005 in relation to the level of employment of people with disabilities, which demonstrates that its recruitment policies have been effective in reaching the targets set out in the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for Persons with Disabilities. The FSPO continues to enhance practices in this area and has emphasised the requirement to achieve an inclusive and diverse workplace over the course of the next strategic period.

The National Treasury Management Agency (NTMA), is aware of and engaged in achieving the targets to increase employment of persons with a disability. The NTMA is exceeding the target of 3% with a current disability workforce of 4.28%. The NTMA is working towards the target of 6% by 2024 by engaging with specialist recruiters and attending specialist recruitment fairs. The Disability Awareness Team works with business units to recruit roles for persons with a disability. The NTMA partners with organisations in order to expand and advance its objectives and continues engagement with Down Syndrome Ireland, the National Council for the Blind of Ireland, AHEAD, Trinity College, and Specialisterne Ireland. Under the terms of

a Service Level Agreement, the NTMA provides staffing services to Home Building Finance Ireland, the National Asset Management Agency and the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, all of which are also bodies under the aegis of my Department.

The Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General takes all reasonable measures to promote and support the employment of persons with disabilities. The Disability Act 2005 requires public service employers to report each year on the number and percentage of employees with disabilities according to the legal definition of a disability. Each employee fills out this form as part of their induction process in the Office. All employees are given access to this form on the Office intranet and may also submit this at any time during employment should a disability develop or come to light. There is a DLO in place to support staff with disabilities employed by the Office. Currently just under 8% of staff of the Office have self-declared a disability. The Office has a range of items available to assist staff with a disability, including sit-stand desks and scanner pens which read text aloud once scanned over an electronic document. Hearing aids are also available and can be linked to staff telephone extension numbers. Other items such as larger monitors for the visually impaired or specialised chairs for back conditions are purchased by the Office on a case by case basis. The Office is also fully wheelchair accessible. The Office also ensures that all vacancies are advertised on its website; the website is enabled with software, Recite me, which reads the site, translates and/or increases the size of text to provide information to visually or audibly impaired persons who may wish to apply for vacancies.

I am advised by the Office of the Revenue Commissioners that there is a strong culture of acceptance and equality among Revenue staff and towards taxpayers, ensuring that human rights and diversity are embraced and accepted. As an Equal Opportunities employer, Revenue operates in compliance with the relevant legislative framework to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities at work, including the Employment Equality Act 1998, the Equal Status Acts 2000, the Employment Equality Act 2004 and the Disability Act 2005. Revenue has two DLOs, who provide information to support new entrants and serving employees with disabilities, as well as those requiring workplace accommodations which may include the provision of assistive technology and certain office equipment. Most Revenue offices countrywide are adapted for use by staff with physical disabilities. In compliance with its reporting obligations under Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005, Revenue provides information on its employment of people with disabilities to the NDA annually. In 2020, the proportion of Revenue employees with a declared disability was 4.1%. Revenue staff are trained in Equality and Diversity as part of their induction training. In 2019, Revenue established a Partnership Intensive Group to review and update its Equality and Diversity Strategy and Public Sector Duty Action Plan. In 2020, the group drafted an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policy document and associated Action Plan. This work is being further developed in 2021, in the context of Revenue's Statement of Strategy and Workforce Plan for the period 2021-2026. The policy provides a future EDI framework, ensuring that Revenue is following best practice, promoting a culture of dignity and respect for all employees, and eliminating all forms of discrimination. Revenue's recruitment competitions are subject to the Code of Practice of the Commission for Public Service Appointments, which has a statutory role to ensure that appointments in the organisations subject to its remit are made on merit and as the result of fair and transparent appointment processes. Revenue actively participates in Disability Programmes such as the WAM Initiative, which serves to widen access to employment for those with disabilities and create attitudinal change and opportunities for further employment and is committed to continue taking all reasonable measures to promote and support the recruitment and employment of people with disabilities and enrich the culture of inclusivity and diversity in its workforce.

The Tax Appeals Commission conducts all its recruitment campaigns through the PAS and any request for staff does not differentiate between persons from minority or disadvantaged

communities or anyone who may have a disability. As of August 2021, the percentage of staff employed by the Commission with a disability is just under 6%.

The Irish Fiscal Advisory Council is committed to supporting and promoting the employment of people with disabilities and is an equal opportunities employer. Currently, none of the Fiscal Council's staff members have declared a disability.

### Flexible Work Practices

180. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Finance if the criteria for the working from home allowance will be reviewed given that those who availed of the help to buy scheme to purchase their home in 2020 are currently precluded from it. [41644/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Help to Buy (HTB) incentive scheme was introduced to assist first-time purchasers with a deposit needed to buy or build a new house or apartment. Subject to a maximum repayment amount, HTB takes the form of a repayment of income tax, including DIRT, paid for the four tax years prior to making an application. A first-time buyer is given the option of selecting all or any of the previous four tax years prior to making an application for HTB.

Section 477C Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 outlines the definitions and conditions that apply to the scheme. Revenue's Tax and Duty manual Part 15-01-46 Help to Buy Scheme outlines further guidance and is available on its website at [www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-15/15-01-46.pdf](http://www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-15/15-01-46.pdf).

In August 2020, the Government introduced an enhancement to the HTB scheme as part of the July Stimulus plan, which was later extended in Finance Act 2020. In summary, where a first time purchaser enters into a contract for the purchase of a new home, or makes the first draw down of the mortgage in the case of a self-build, during the period 23 July 2020 and 31 December 2021, increased relief for the HTB scheme will be available to the lesser of:

- (i) €30,000 (increased from €20,000),
- (ii) 10 per cent (increased from 5 per cent) of the purchase price of a new home or the completion value of the property in the case of self builds, or,
- (iii) the amount of Income Tax and DIRT paid in the four complete tax years prior to making the application.

This is subject to the conditions of the scheme as outlined in the legislation being met.

As regards the working from home allowance, I am advised by Revenue that while working remotely does not entitle PAYE workers to a tax credit or an allowance, there is a Revenue administrative practice in place relating to e-Workers who incur certain expenditure in the performance of the duties of their employment from home.

E-Workers will incur certain expenditure in the performance of their duties from home, such as additional heating, electricity, and broadband costs. Revenue allows an employer to make compensatory payments of up to €3.20 per day to remote workers, subject to certain conditions, without deducting PAYE, PRSI, or USC.

Where an employer does not pay €3.20 per day to an e-Worker, or indeed where an employee incurs costs in excess of the €3.20 per day paid by the employer, the employees concerned retain their statutory right to claim a deduction under section 114 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 in respect of actual vouched expenses they have incurred wholly, exclusively and necessarily in the performance of the duties of their employment. PAYE employees are entitled to claim any such additional costs in respect of the number of days spent working from home, apportioned on the basis of business and private use.

As regards the Deputy's question, the position is that the HTB scheme is mutually exclusive from other claims for refunds of tax paid by an individual. By way of example, where an individual paid tax of €25,000 in 2019 and claimed €20,000 in that year for HTB, some or all of the balance of tax of €5,000 remaining could be refunded to the person, if he/she had additional tax credits or reliefs to claim that year in respect of expenditure on items such as working from home expenses or health expenses. Of course, if a person has had all their tax deducted for a year refunded to them under the HTB scheme, he/she would not be entitled to any further tax refunds for that year.

In the scenario mentioned by the Deputy, for an individual who availed of the HTB scheme to purchase his or her home in 2020, he or she is not precluded from claiming a deduction in respect of actual vouched expenses incurred in working from home in 2020 or 2021 (or for that matter, from an employer paying that individual €3.20 per day). The HTB legislation prescribes that an individual must select a relevant tax year, which means a year of assessment within the four tax years immediately preceding the year in which the application was made. Thus, for a house purchased in 2020, the relevant tax years are 2016, 2017, 2018 or 2019.

A PAYE worker who incurs relevant expenditure can claim e-Working expenses by completing an Income Tax return at year end. Revenue advises that the simplest way for taxpayers to claim their e-Working expenses and any other tax credit entitlements is by logging into the myAccount facility on the Revenue website.

Revenue has published detailed guidance on this subject and on the question of how claims for e-Working expenses should be calculated and submitted in the Tax and Duty manual 'e-Working and Tax', which is available on the Revenue website at [www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-05/05-02-13.pdf](http://www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-05/05-02-13.pdf).

Finally, the national remote working strategy 'Making Remote Work', commits the Tax Strategy Group to reviewing the current tax arrangements for remote working in respect of both employees and employers. The Tax Strategy Group will take account of the economic, financial and organisational implications arising from the experience of remote working during the pandemic and assess the merits of further enhancement for consideration in the context of Budget 2022.

## **Financial Services**

**181. Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Finance if the commercial terms under which public investment was made by ISIF in a company (details supplied) assure the State preferential access to genome data collected by the company; if so, the details of preferential access; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41649/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The NTMA have informed me that in line with its double bottom line mandate, ISIF made an investment in Genuity Science. ISIF's investment was, amongst other things, aimed at supporting the creation of a precision medicine

hub in Ireland which it was hoped would have associated benefits to Ireland. ISIF's role in its investments is that of an investor/shareholder with the day to day operations of such companies including Genuity typically being managed by the relevant executive management team. Genuity Science is a standalone commercial entity and decisions relating to its commercial activities, including in relation to genetic information it holds, are a matter for Genuity Science.

### Tax Collection

182. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance the amount collected by the Revenue Commissioners in excise duty on mineral oils in the form of mineral oil tax and carbon tax since 2016 to date in 2021. [41667/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that receipts for Mineral Oil Tax (MOT) and carbon tax on mineral oils for the years up to year 2019 are published on the Revenue website at:

[www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/excise/net-receipts-by-commodity.pdf](http://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/excise/net-receipts-by-commodity.pdf)

The receipts from MOT and carbon tax for 2020 and to the end of July 2021 are shown in the table below. Please note that the 2021 receipts are currently provisional and maybe subject to change.

	Mineral Oil Tax		Carbon Tax	
	2020 €m	2021* €m	2020 €m	2021* €m
Petrol	424.64	228.69	46.09	31.18
Aviation Gasoline	0.53	0.25	0.06	0.05
Auto -diesel	1,342.25	782.46	212.57	153.68
Marked Gas Oil	46.76	25.56	65.27	45.75
Kerosene	-	-	68.23	50.47
Fuel Oil	0.70	0.30	1.32	0.99
LPG (Other)	-	-	11.24	8.81
Auto LPG	0.13	0.70	0.04	0.03

\*to end July 2021

### Financial Services

183. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Finance the purpose of the deemed disposal of exchange traded funds for taxation purposes after eight years; if he plans to change this arrangement for small investors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41825/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The normal tax treatment afforded to Irish collective investment funds is that the funds invested are allowed to grow on a tax-free basis within the fund. The income is taxed at the level of the investor rather than the fund, as is standard international practice.

In order to ensure that the appropriate tax is collected from Irish investors, funds are obliged to operate an exit tax regime and remit the tax deducted in this manner to Revenue. This charge to tax does not apply in the case of unit holders who are non-resident. In the case of non-resident investors, their liability to tax on gains from the fund will be determined in their home jurisdiction.

The broad rationale for exempting such funds from direct taxation is to facilitate individuals

to invest collectively, without suffering double taxation (that is, taxation both within the fund and in the hands of the investor on distribution). Most OECD countries now have a tax system that provides for neutrality between direct investments and investments through a Collective Investment Vehicle/Fund.

There is a charge to tax on Irish residents on the happening of a “chargeable event”. In order to prevent the indefinite deferral of a chargeable event (and therefore an exit charge), a deemed disposal occurs 8 years following inception of a policy of life assurance or acquisition of a fund and then every 8 years thereafter. The deemed disposal rules also apply to equivalent offshore funds. Any gain on the investment which arises from the date of inception or the date of acquisition to the date of the deemed disposal is subject to tax. This ensures that income isn’t rolled up indefinitely in life assurance policies or funds without being taxed. On the ultimate disposal of the investment, any tax paid which arose as a result of a deemed disposal is allowed as a credit against any final tax liability on disposal.

There are no plans to review the 8 year deemed disposal rule at this time.

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

184. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Finance if a business which is only open to the public for a fixed period of time each year can claim the Covid restrictions support scheme during any other part of the year in cases in which there is ongoing storage, maintenance and preparations involved that can be proven; if not, the reason for the refusal to cover these ongoing overheads while operational but not open to the public; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41839/21]

**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.

A relevant business activity which is seasonal in nature is not restricted from qualifying under CRSS where they are subject to Covid restrictions and as a result, are prohibited or significantly restricted from allowing customers access their business premises, and they meet all other qualifying criteria.

Where a business is no longer subject to COVID restrictions which require them to prohibit or restrict customers from accessing their business premises, that business will not be eligible for CRSS for the periods where they choose not to open because of the seasonal nature of the business.

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.

As non-essential retail 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 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.

Businesses who qualified for CRSS and who, from 2 June 2021, become eligible to claim a “restart week” payment, can submit a single claim for a “restart week” payment, that will cover a period of three weeks at double the normal rate, to assist them with the additional costs of reopening. The amount that may be claimed in respect of each “restart week” is subject to a maximum weekly amount payable under the scheme which has been increased to €10,000 per week specifically in relation to the triple restart week payments.

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 is now open for applications via the Revenue Commissioners website. 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 Deputy will be aware that the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme has been extended to the end of 2021 and it is expected that CRSS will be continued to the end of 2021 for those businesses that are still directly affected by public health restrictions that may remain in place.

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.

## **Tax Forms**

185. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Finance if he plans to defer the latest date for filing self-employed and corporate tax returns for 2020 this year due to the difficulties businesses and accountants have had due to Covid-19 restrictions in which many of their staff have been working remotely and also where response times from departments and State agencies are often delayed also affecting the ability of businesses and their accountants to access necessary information for tax returns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41858/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I can assure the Deputy that Revenue

understands and appreciates the unprecedented situation facing taxpayers and businesses as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and has played a key role in responding to the many challenges arising during this crisis. Revenue works very closely with businesses and tax practitioners and continues to be flexible and responsive in putting solutions and processes in place that assist and support businesses. Revenue's approach must also have regard to the very considerable supports being provided by Government, the need to make sure that businesses are correctly availing of those supports and the need to ensure ongoing tax compliance by those availing of these supports.

For taxpayers who file their 2020 Form 11 return and make the appropriate payment through ROS for Preliminary Tax for 2021 and Income Tax balance due for 2020, the due date has already been extended by Revenue from 31 October to Wednesday 17 November 2021. Where access to necessary information for tax returns is being impacted by COVID-related difficulties, the relevant return should be submitted on a 'best estimate' basis. Revenue has advised me that it would expect that the instance of such difficulties is expected to be very low and Revenue has assured me that any subsequent amendments can be completed on a self-correction basis without incurring additional penalties.

Revenue will continue to monitor the situation over the coming months, but no further extension on filing deadlines is envisaged at this time. The timely filing of tax returns is essential so that Revenue can quantify liabilities, particularly for the purposes of Debt Warehousing and for continued eligibility of businesses to the various COVID-19 support schemes.

### **House Prices**

186. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Finance if he will request banks to extend the lifetime of mortgage approval for borrowers given the dearth of affordable properties to buy and the increase in house prices far above those advertised for even modest properties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41906/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** There is no specific regulatory provision which specifically relates to the duration period of a mortgage approval (either an Approval in Principle or a mortgage offer). However, lenders should make the duration of any Approval in Principle clear to a consumer, in line with the requirement of the Consumer Protection Code 2012 to provide clear information to a consumer and to bring key information to the attention of the consumer. When a lender offers a mortgage to a consumer, the Code requires that the lender must include the length of time for which the mortgage offer is valid in the offer document. However, it remains a business matter for individual lenders to set the duration period of a mortgage approval (and if necessary to decide whether or not to extend the period of mortgage approval) and it would not be appropriate for me to become involved in the commercial and business making decisions of lenders. Ultimately of course there is also an obligation on lenders to provide mortgage credit to consumers only where the results of a creditworthiness assessment indicates that the consumer's obligations resulting from the credit agreement are likely to be met in the manner required under that agreement and lenders will need to satisfy themselves that they can comply with this obligation.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the Central Bank has indicated that it expects all regulated firms to take a consumer-focused approach and to act in their customers' best interests at all times, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. If a mortgage applicant is not satisfied with how a regulated firm is dealing with them in relation to an application for credit or the drawn down of credit, or they believe that the regulated firm is not following the requirements of the Central Bank's codes and regulations or other financial services law, the mortgage ap-

plicant should make a complaint directly to the regulated firm. If the mortgage applicant is still not satisfied with the response from the regulated firm, he or she can refer the complaint to the independent Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman.

### **Childcare Services**

187. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to increase tax relief on childcare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41942/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Government acknowledges the continuing cost pressures on parents, particularly those with young children.

In recognition of these cost pressures, a number of support measures are already in place to ease the burden on working parents. These include various tax-exempted child-care related supports provided by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and measures such as the Working Family Payment provided by the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

With regard to taxation measures, and separate to the above:

- The Accelerated Capital Allowances scheme for Childcare Services was introduced to encourage employers to develop childcare facilities onsite for their employees.

- Individuals who provide child-minding services in their own home may claim childcare services relief each year, provided that they do not receive more than €15,000 income per annum from the child-minding income.

- Furthermore, a Single Person Child Carer tax credit of €1,650 is available as well as an additional standard rate band of €4,000. This credit and band is payable to any single person with a child under 18 years of age or over 18 years of age if in full time education or permanently incapacitated. The primary claimant may relinquish this credit and increase in the rate band to a secondary claimant with whom the child resides for not less than 100 days in the year.

- I have no plans to introduce a specific income tax relief for parents to assist with childcare costs. As the Deputy will appreciate, I receive many requests for the introduction of new tax reliefs and the extension of existing ones. In considering these, I must be mindful of the public finances and the many demands on the Exchequer and I must have regard to budgetary constraints and the equitable treatment of all tax-payers. Tax reliefs, no matter how worthwhile in themselves, reduce the tax base and make general reform of the tax system that much more difficult.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

188. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Finance the measures he is taking to promote or facilitate remote working for staff in his Department or bodies under the aegis of his Department; the costs this has generated in terms of the provision of laptops, desktop computers or contributions to wi-fi costs or phone-related expenses; the number of staff who have applied for permission to work from home on a permanent or hybrid-model basis (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41952/21]

209. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Finance the steps being taken to facilitate remote working within his Department in particular to encourage remote working for those who live in the regions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42706/21]

211. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Finance the way in which his Department and public bodies and agencies under his remit are accommodating requests for persons to work from home. [42756/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 188, 209 and 211 together.

Departments and Offices are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible.

My Department is an active participant on the interdepartmental working group that is developing a central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service and which will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

The Department's Covid-19 Response Management Group meets weekly and continues to consolidate work already advanced in response to the pandemic in line with on-going Government guidance and recommendations.

The cost for providing equipment for the facilitation of Departmental staff to work from home from 01 February 2020 to 31 August 2021 is set-out below in tabular form. These figures are VAT inclusive:

Laptops and hybrids

-	2020/2021
Laptops	€154,489.05
Hybrids	€92,126.27
Total	€246,615.32

Computer Peripherals

-	2021	2020	Total
USB Multi-ports	€962.52	€146.4	€1,108.92
Cables	€2,232.55	N/A	€2,232.55
Headsets	€1,090.67	€3,500.25	€4,590.92
Monitors	€15,458.75	€7,660.5	€23,119.25
Keyboard+Mice	€1,399.99	€968.21	€2,368.20
Docks	€7,995.00	€9,394.74	€17,389.74
Total	€29,139.48	€21,670.1	€50,809.58

Phones, mobile Wifi access dongles, usage:

Handsets/dongles	€5,049.15
Usage	€1,316.1
Total	€6,365.25

Licences:

-	2020	2021	
Citrix licence	€34,917	€2,672.11	
Citrix licence tokens	€2,110.47	€712.05	

-	2020	2021	
Total			€40,411.63

The position of those bodies under the aegis of my Department which have direct employees is detailed below, all figures provided are inclusive of VAT.

The Central Bank of Ireland, which also provides staffing and facilities for another body under the aegis of my Department, the Investor Compensation Company DAC, made a strategic decision in 2017 to replace desk top computers with Wi-Fi enabled laptop computers to facilitate and encourage collaboration and mobility within the North Wall Quay premises. As a consequence of this decision all staff were already equipped to work remotely from 16 March 2020 when Public Health restrictions were introduced. Approximately eight weeks after the introduction of these restrictions the Central Bank began a process of providing additional equipment such as a monitor, office chair, laptop stand, keyboard and mouse, to improve the ergonomic experience of remote working staff at a cost of €353,259. The Bank does not pay any contribution towards home telephony or Wi-Fi costs. The Bank is currently undertaking an impact assessment of potential future ways of working which will result in the introduction of an optional hybrid working model for the majority of staff. Temporary transitional working arrangements in line with current public health guidelines are in operation pending completion of this assessment.

The Credit Review Office (CRO) currently has 3 staff: 1 Credit Reviewer employed by my Department and 2 seconded from Enterprise Ireland. The CRO has incurred no additional costs in relation to remote working, and has received no applications for remote working to date.

The Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO) has taken measures to facilitate remote working since March 2020, in order to comply with public health measures in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic while ensuring it continues to fulfil its statutory role and meets the needs of its customers. The costs associated with the facilitation of remote working are as follows: €105,892 on IT equipment and €1,887 on telephony. The FSPO has not contributed to individual staff Wi-Fi or phone-related expenses. The costs detailed above relate to the provision of FSPO equipment to facilitate staff to work remotely. The FSPO has undertaken staff engagement surveys on remote working to assist in determining the future working arrangements of the FSPO in accordance with public health guidelines. The FSPO is examining the potential to pilot a blended working arrangement for team members, where appropriate, recognising that the primary focus of any future working arrangements will be delivery against the FSPO's statutory role and ensuring the delivery of an efficient, accessible service for all its customers, while taking account the needs of staff and ensuring that Government policy in this area is implemented.

All staff of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council have been working remotely since March 2020 and continue to do so. The Council has invested approximately €7,500 in respect of the provision of laptops and equipment to facilitate remote working. The Council has a remote working policy in place with a hybrid-model applying on a physical return to the office.

The National Treasury Management Agency (NTMA) introduced remote working for employees in July 2019 by way of the NTMA Remote Working Guide. Since the onset of the pandemic in 2020, and in accordance with Government advice, NTMA employees have predominantly worked from home. It is the NTMA's expectation that employees will not have to seek permission for hybrid working rather that a hybrid working model will be available to all employees. The costs incurred to date in terms of the provision of Laptops and ICT related peripherals to promote or facilitate remote work for staff are as follows: €207,260 on ICT equipment and €3,191 on reimbursement of employee costs incurred on personal mobile accounts

for the purposes of carrying out work. While the NTMA Remote Working Guide is dated July 2019, costs were primarily incurred further to the impact of Covid-19 from March 2020 onwards. Under the terms of a Service Level Agreement, the NTMA provides staffing services to Home Building Finance Ireland, the National Asset Management Agency and the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland which are also bodies under the aegis of my Department.

Staff of the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General are working remotely in line with current Government and HSE guidelines and will continue to do so until updated advice has been received. Due to the nature of the work of the Office, a degree of remote working was already facilitated prior to the current pandemic, a teleworking policy was in place and staff had the necessary equipment to work outside of the Office, at home or in client premises. The Office has been able to fund any additional costs associated with remote working during the pandemic from savings in other areas within the Office's voted allocation. A model for the future of work in the Office developed with extensive staff consultation, has recently been approved by the Audit Board. The model will facilitate a hybrid working arrangement enabling staff to divide their time between remote and in-office work while ensuring that the business objectives are achieved. The model will form the basis of a blended working policy for the Office to be developed once the central policy framework has been agreed.

Most staff at the Office of the Revenue Commissioners have been working remotely since March 2020. Generally in excess of 75% of Revenue's staff are remote working each week. Revenue staff are currently continuing to work in line with Government Covid-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. Revenue is an active participant on the interdepartmental working group that is developing General Principles to inform a longer term remote working framework for the Civil Service. It is expected that the central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of Revenue's future blended working policy. The primary objective of the longer-term framework will be towards ensuring that Revenue's business requirements are fully supported and will also be in accordance with the objectives of the "Programme for Government – Our Shared Future" in relation to the availability of remote working for staff in the Public Sector. Revenue is also actively participating with other Government Departments in the design of the application process that will be used to administer staff requests to work from home once the current Covid-19 restrictions are lifted. In a survey of Revenue staff carried out in May 2021, 67% of respondents indicated that they favoured blended working for the future. Revenue's key expenditure figures for equipment to enable homeworking since March 2020 are €565,000 on laptops, €92,000 on headsets, €39,000 on network equipment, and €447,200 on mobile phones.

The Tax Appeals Commission has drafted a remote working policy for its staff members but is awaiting final guidelines and direction from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform before implementation can take place. The new remote working policy is expected to be offered to all staff members. The Commission spent €27,847 procuring laptops for the majority of staff to enable employees to work from home. This expenditure was also necessary for the Commission to move to a "Build To Share Desktop Service" in August 2020 provided by the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer. This support now underpins the ICT infrastructure that maintains the Commission's business services including servers, storage, government networks, perimeter defenses, conferencing services, web content filters and anti-virus faculties. To date, no staff member has requested remote working on a permanent or hybrid-basis, however, the Commission conducted an internal anonymous survey in May 2021 which indicated a level of interest in some form of hybrid working.

189. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to insurance companies declining employer's insurance to disabled employers who manage their own support services in order to live independently in the community; if he has engaged with insurance companies on this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41968/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I understand that the issue referred to relates to insurance for companies which are set up with the support of *Áiseanna Tacaíochta*. This in turn facilitates direct payments to its disabled members to enable them manage their own support services. I am aware of the difficulties being experienced by this organisation and its members regarding the increased cost of insurance cover and share concerns regarding such issues as cost and supply of insurance. However, as the Deputy will appreciate, neither I nor the Central Bank of Ireland can interfere in the provision or pricing of insurance products, nor do we have the power to direct insurance companies to provide cover to specific individuals. This position is reinforced by the EU Solvency II Directive insurance framework.

Having said that, since becoming aware of this issue, my officials have engaged with the industry representative body Insurance Ireland. It has acknowledged that some insurers have withdrawn from parts of the liability insurance sector in recent years, and also noted the increase in average claims costs during this time, pointing to data from the recent report of the National Claims Information Database. According to Insurance Ireland, increases in claims costs were due to volatility in the personal injuries claims environment.

In this regard, I believe that the new Personal Injuries Guidelines should provide much greater certainty regarding award levels, in addition to reducing awards for many common injuries, and also leading to lower legal fees by encouraging greater use of the Personal Injuries Assessment Board to settle claims. This should have a stabilising impact in relation to the issues currently being experienced by these organisations. Indeed, in meetings with the main insurance companies in the Irish market, Minister of State Fleming has stated the Government's expectation that insurers should now increase their risk appetite to extend cover to new market segments or areas they may have withdrawn from in recent years, in light of these savings. I understand that he will be meeting with insurers again in the coming months to review their response to the Guidelines and other insurance reforms.

Furthermore, I also hope that the improved claims environment resulting from the implementation of the Guidelines will help to attract new entrants into the Irish market, or encourage providers who previously exited this market to return. Separately, I understand that the new Office to Promote Competition in the Insurance Market is working with IDA Ireland to develop a customised proposition for potential new market entrants, and to identify a shortlist of specific target companies.

These and further important actions, such as reviewing the duty of care, are being prioritised under the Action Plan for Insurance Reform. The implementation of the Government's broad package of reforms should assist in the development of a more sustainable and competitive market by deepening and widening the supply of insurance here, thereby improving both the cost and availability of cover for all groups, particularly those that deliver such valuable services as the organisation in question.

## **Tax Credits**

190. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance if the 5% tax credit (details supplied) will be retained; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42001/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Section 481 TCA 1997 provides a 32% payable credit for eligible expenditure on film production in Ireland. It is available to Irish and international film production companies that are resident in the State or in an EEA State and carry on business in the State through a branch or subsidiary. The scheme is intended to act as a stimulus to the creation of an indigenous film industry in the State, creating quality employment opportunities and supporting the expression of the Irish culture.

Finance Act 2018 introduced a short-term, tapered regional uplift. The purpose of the regional uplift is to support the development of new, local pools of talent in areas outside the current main production hubs, to support the geographic spread of the audio-visual sector. The regional availability of the uplift is limited to areas in Ireland sanctioned to receive regional aid under the EU regional aid guidelines.

When introduced in Finance Act 2018 the regional uplift was to be phased out on a tiered basis with 5% available in years 1 and 2 (2019 & 2020), 3% available in year 3 (2021), 2% available in year 4 (2022), and 0% available from year 5 on. However, the COVID-19 crisis had a detrimental impact on the audiovisual sector, with the majority of production companies having to suspend activity for a significant portion of 2020 and, as a result, much of the intended incentive effect of the regional uplift in 2020 was lost. Therefore Finance Bill 2020 amended the regional uplift to provide for an additional 5% year in 2021, in effect to replace the incentive year lost as a result of the Covid-related public health measures. The tapered withdrawal of the uplift then restarts, reducing to 3% in 2022, 2% in 2023, and Nil thereafter.

My officials examine a range of possible measures in advance of the Finance Act each year, including potential amendments to Section 481 Film Relief, and the Deputy's proposal will be considered as part of this process. In this regard it should be noted that film relief is an approved State aid and any amendments to the scheme would require consideration of State aid constraints and approval from the European Commission.

## **Tax Reliefs**

191. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance if he has considered extending the tax relief applied to general practitioner referred physiotherapy costs to general practitioner referred therapy sessions for mental health; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42014/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am informed by Revenue that Section 469 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 provides for tax relief in respect of qualifying health expenses.

Section 469 defines "health expenses" as "expenses in respect of the provision of health care including the services of a practitioner".

A practitioner is defined in the section as "any person who is:

- a) registered in the register established under section 43 of the Medical Practitioners Act 2007,
- b) registered in the register established under section 26 of the Dentists Act, 1985, or,
- c) in relation to health care provided outside the State, entitled under the laws of the country in which the care is provided to practice medicine or dentistry there".

Regarding therapy sessions for mental health, tax relief will apply where the therapist is

a qualified practitioner as defined above. The relief is also available from a psychologist or psychotherapist if they are a qualified practitioner, or where a patient is referred by a qualified practitioner for a diagnostic procedure.

This is similar to the position that applies to other medical expenses, such as physiotherapy and I am satisfied that the legislation provides sufficient flexibility for expenses that should qualify for tax relief. Accordingly, there are no plans to change these arrangements at this time.

Comprehensive guidance material on medical expenses can be found on Revenue's website in Tax and Duty Manual Part 15-01-12 [www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-15/15-01-12.pdf](http://www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-15/15-01-12.pdf).

## Banking Sector

192. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the total invested by the State and the cash received to date in disposals, redemptions and coupons, dividends and fees; the net cash position and valuation of remaining investment; and the net position at the end of July 2021 in banks (details supplied) in tabular form. [42018/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As requested by the Deputy, the table below sets out the cumulative position in relation to the State's investment in AIB and PTSB as at end-July.

On the 23rd June, I announced my intention to sell part of the State's 13.9% shareholding in Bank of Ireland by way of a trading plan. At the same time, I confirmed that I was limited in the amount of detail I could disclose in relation to the plan as it would be detrimental to maximising value for the taxpayer. The number of shares sold, the average price achieved and the cash generated will be disclosed once the plan has been completed. Accordingly, the position in the table for BOI is at 22nd June, the day before the announcement was made.

Table: Summary of State investments

-	AIB*	PTSB*		BOI**
	€m	€m		€m
Gross invested	20,751	3,954		4,667
Sale/redemption proceeds - including accrued int	7,112	1,891		3,597
Investment income	1,728	120		784
CIFS/ELG - net	1,783	669		1,547
Net cash position - In/ (out)	(10,128)	(1,274)		1,261
Market value of equity stakes	3,999	497		676
Net position - including valuations	(6,130)	(777)		1,937

\*Position for AIB and PTSB as at end-July 2021.

\*\* Position for BOI as at 22 June 2021.

## Pension Provisions

193. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn

to the practice in the public service whereby retirees receive a monthly pension payment and an interim payment of approximately half the after-tax amount in the middle of the month; if this arrangement is revenue compliant and all relevant deductions can and are being made; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42037/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The matter of the Public Service payroll is primarily a matter for my colleague the Minister of Public Expenditure and Reform. Furthermore, enquiries made by my Department with relevant bodies failed to identify the practice within the public service pensions payment system to which the Deputy refers. However, if the Deputy wishes to provide further details, my officials will make further enquiries.

That being said, in terms of Revenue compliance in relation to payroll practices, Revenue have advised as follows:

The Pay As You Earn (PAYE) system is a method of tax deduction under which an employer (including occupational pension providers) calculates and deducts any income tax due each time a payment of wages, salary, pensions etc. is made to an employee (any reference to employee also includes ‘occupational pension recipients’). In addition, employers are obliged to calculate and deduct any liability to Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI), Universal Social Charge (USC) and Local Property Tax (LPT).

The PAYE system operates on a receipts basis which means that income tax and other statutory deductions are to be operated when a payment is being made to an employee. Under the PAYE system, tax should be operated on any interim payments or advance payments of emoluments made by an employer to an employee. With the introduction of PAYE real time payroll reporting with effect from 1 January 2019, employers are obliged to report their employees’ pay and statutory deductions to Revenue, on or before the date they pay their staff.

I have been advised by Revenue that the frequency of payments to retirees is a matter for the Public Service employer in question and notwithstanding this an employer is obliged to operate PAYE correctly on all payments.

## **Tax Credits**

194. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the reason the 30 per cent research and development tax credit regime for small and micro companies provided in the Finance Act 2019 is not yet operable; and when it will come into effect. [42108/21]

224. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if he will provide an overview of the changes announced to the research and development tax credit for small and micro-companies in section 25 of Finance Act 2019. [43176/21]

225. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the date on which a submission was made to the European Commission for State Aid approval with respect to changes made to the research and development tax credit for small and micro-companies under section 25 of the Finance Act 2019; the status of this submission; the expected date of its approval; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43177/21]

226. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated cost in 2022 of amending the research and development tax credit regime by allowing small and micro companies to receive the credit in one instalment rather than three instalments over a 33-month period payable not earlier than the relevant tax pay and file date for the company’s accounting period in which the qualifying expenditure was made; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

[43178/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 194, 224, 225 and 226 together.

In Budget 2020, I provided for the introduction of a number of enhancements to the R&D tax credit for micro and small companies, including an increase in the rate of credit and an enhanced method of calculating the payable credit.

Section 25 of Finance Act 2019 introduced new measures in respect of the Research and Development (R&D) tax credit for micro and small companies, however as these are targeted measures they require State aid approval from the European Commission, and were therefore introduced subject to a Commencement Order.

The planned measures for micro and small companies include:

- An increase in the R&D tax credit rate from 25% to 30%.
- The addition of an enhanced method to calculate the payable element of the R&D tax credit, based on twice the current year payroll liabilities.
- The introduction of a new provision to allow pre-trading R&D expenditure to qualify for an R&D tax credit, which is limited to offsets or repayments calculated by reference to payroll tax (PAYE and USC) and VAT liabilities for the same period.
- Officials in my Department began engagement with the Commission on this matter in March 2020. However the Deputy will be aware that this coincided with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, which required the immediate attention of officials both in Ireland and in the Commission to develop and implement measures to support businesses and employees affected by the public health restrictions.
- Since the onset of the pandemic, this Government has introduced extensive Covid-19 supports, many of which will have provided immediate support to small businesses to maintain a level of trade and retain their staff in employment.
- The measures specific to small and micro companies therefore have not yet been commenced, but the easing of public health restrictions and the reducing need for related support measures will allow greater scope for my officials to progress matters relating to the R&D credit.
- In respect of PQ 43178/21, I am advised by Revenue that future levels of expenditure on research and development is not known and therefore a cost for the year 2022 of the Deputy's proposed amendment cannot be estimated. However, based on information included in tax returns for 2019 (the most recent year available), the cash flow impact in that year would have been €25 million if the Deputy's proposal had been implemented in that year for small and micro companies.
- The Deputy may also be interested in Revenue's published information in respect of the research and development tax credit, which is available at: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/tax-expenditures/r-and-d-tax-credit-statistics.pdf> .

### **Vehicle Registration Tax**

195. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Finance if he will address issues (de-

tails supplied) regarding VRT; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42112/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Disabled Drivers & Disabled Passengers Scheme provides relief from VRT and VAT on the purchase and use of an adapted car, as well as an exemption from motor tax and an annual fuel grant. Details of these reliefs and the grant in respect of fuel usage are available on the Revenue website.

The relief from Value Added Tax and Vehicle Registration Tax are generous in nature amounting to up to €10,000, €16,000 or €22,000, depending on the level of adaption required for the vehicle.

It should be noted that the new VRT charging table does not necessarily result in increased VRT rates. VRT is an emissions-based tax and therefore the amount of VRT incurred will vary across different vehicle makes and models. Typically, the new rates structure will result in increases for high emission vehicles, and decreases for lower emission vehicles. Accordingly, I have no plans to amend the reliefs at this time.

### **Financial Irregularities**

196. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance if the Central Bank will investigate the widespread credit reporting errors in 2019 and 2020 by a bank (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42258/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Officials in my Department referred the Deputy's question to the Central Bank of Ireland and received the following response in this regard:

### **House Sales**

197. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance if the help-to-buy scheme, which is due to end in 2021, will be extended to help those trying to buy their own home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42302/21]

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

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

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

198. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance if the employment wage subsidy scheme will continue to be made available to childcare providers in quarter 4 of 2021 without the income reduction requirements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42411/21]

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

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

The objective of the scheme is to support all employment and maintain the link between the employer and employee insofar as is possible. The EWSS has been a key component of the Government's response to the continued Covid-19 crisis to support viable firms and encourage employment in the midst of these very challenging times. To date, payments of over €4.6 billion and PRSI credit of over €735 million have been granted to 51,200 employers in respect of 650,100 workers.

I have been clear that there will be no cliff-edge to the EWSS and, as the Deputy will be aware from announcements made in June, it has been decided that the scheme is now to be extended until the end of December 2021. For Q3 2021, the Government has decided to broadly maintain the status quo for EWSS, including the enhanced rates of support, with a modification to widen eligibility, and maintaining the reduced rate of Employers' PRSI of 0.5%.

Decisions in relation to the configuration of the EWSS in Q4 2021 in relation to its various aspects will be addressed in the coming weeks. Also, no decisions have been taken in relation to future of the scheme beyond the end of Q4, 2021.

The Government remains fully committed to supporting businesses and employers insofar as is possible at this time.

### State Assets

199. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the sale of a company (details supplied); the implications of the sale for the State's investment through the Irish Strategic Investment Fund; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42512/21]

200. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Finance if financial safeguards were put in place to protect the State's investment in a company (details supplied); the estimated loss to the State on its investment to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42513/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 199 and 200 together.

The NTMA has informed me that ISIF has a shareholding in Genuity Science and that three operating subsidiaries of Genuity Science have been acquired by HiberCell in an all-stock transaction. ISIF continues to remain a shareholder in Genuity Science and as such is now an indirect shareholder in HiberCell.

I am also informed that the transaction with Hibercell was assessed as representing the best opportunity at this time to maximise value for Genuity Science shareholders in the future and was considered as giving the best chance to maintain ongoing Genuity operations including in Ireland, albeit now under Hibercell. ISIF has invested €66m in Genuity Science to date, alongside a range of sophisticated private investors on commercial terms which were acceptable to such investors and ISIF. Consistent with the approach it takes on all investments, ISIF conducted an appropriate due diligence exercise prior to making its investment. I understand that for reasons of commercial sensitivity ISIF does not comment on the carrying value of its investments from time to time but I note that ISIF has publicly stated that Genuity's valuation has been negatively impacted by the global pandemic and its exposure to geopolitical events.

ISIF's portfolio is diversified, comprising investments in a range of asset classes across the spectrum of risk that are consistent with its mandate of achieving economic impact while earning a commercial return. High-risk investments in the life sciences and tech sectors comprise a very small percentage of the overall portfolio (less than 3%). Investments of this nature can be volatile and are often early-stage but have the ability to deliver significant return potential. ISIF has a number of direct investments that have and continue to deliver significant gains, however ISIF also expects that there will inevitably be some individual investments where it will recover less than the total invested. Notwithstanding the risks inherent in these investments, since ISIF's inception, overall high-risk investments have delivered positive returns of circa 18% at H1 2021. Overall, the returns on the total portfolio of €9.2bn since inception exceed €2.2bn, with as of H1 2021 generating returns of 5.2% year to date. The fund has generated annual returns of 4.1% pa since inception.

### **Insurance Industry**

201. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance his advice on an insurance matter (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42559/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** At the outset, it is important to note that neither the Minister for Finance, nor the Central Bank of Ireland, has any influence over the pricing or provision of insurance products, as this is a commercial matter assessed on a case-by-case basis. This position is reinforced by the EU legislative framework for insurance (the Solvency II Directive).

Motor insurers use a combination of rating factors in making their individual decisions on whether to offer cover and what terms to apply. Factors include those such as: the relevant driving experience; as vehicle age and type; the drivers age; the relevant claims record; the number of drivers; how the vehicle is used, etc. Insurers do not all use the same combination of rating factors, and as a result prices vary across the market. Consumers are accordingly free to choose whatever product best meets their needs, with price obviously being a relevant factor. Insurance companies also price in accordance with their own past claims experience. This illustrates the importance of shopping around for insurance.

In relation to the experience referred to with a specific insurance provider, it is important to note that as Minister for Finance, I am not in a position to comment on or intervene in respect of individual cases.

I understand that there is no statutory basis behind the individual policies of insurance companies pertaining to the time period of non-continuous driving experience for the purposes of retaining insurance cover. Officials in my Department have previously engaged with Insurance Ireland on this issue. They confirmed that the general current timeframe of two years compa-

nies use in this regard is one which appears to have evolved within the insurance market itself, rather than representing a rule imposed by the industry and/or the State, and that there may be flexibility from certain individual providers if the time period concerned is marginally over two years. Ultimately, this is a commercial matter for companies and will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

Throughout the pandemic, Government has consistently called on insurers to treat customers honestly, fairly and professionally, and in line with the Central Bank's Consumer Protection Code. With regard to insurance for Small Public Service Vehicle (SPSV) drivers, I understand from my officials that several insurers in the market introduced measures last year to ease the burden on drivers, including the ability to reduce vehicle cover to social, pleasure and domestic use only with pro-rata refunds provided. However, as the Deputy will be aware, I cannot direct insurers to offer such measures. It should be noted that the National Transport Authority (NTA) advises that where SPSV insurance is not in place, the driver does not hold a valid SPSV licence. I believe that it is important that anyone concerned should engage directly with their insurer or broker and the NTA regarding their circumstances and options.

In situations where a person is not satisfied with the service of an insurance provider, it is advisable that that person make a complaint to the firm's internal complaint resolution process. The Consumer Protection Code requires that if after 40 days the complaint has not been resolved to the customer's satisfaction, the regulated entity must inform the consumer that they may refer their complaint to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO). The FSPO is a statutory official who acts as an independent arbiter of disputes, which consumers may have with their insurance company or other financial service provider. The FSPO can be contacted either by email at [info@fspoi.ie](mailto:info@fspoi.ie) or by telephone at 01-567-7000.

Finally, where an individual is having difficulty in receiving an insurance quotation, or a private company has issues in relation to named drivers on their fleet policy, which may be relevant in this case, they may wish to use the Declined Cases Agreement (DCA). Under the terms of the DCA, which is adhered to by all motor insurers in Ireland, the insurance market will not refuse cover if the person has approached at least three insurers and has been unable to obtain cover from them. In this regard, there are further details available on the Insurance Ireland website, while more generally, Insurance Ireland also operates a free Insurance Information Service for those who have queries, complaints or difficulties in relation to obtaining insurance. The relevant contact details are: [feedback@insuranceireland.eu](mailto:feedback@insuranceireland.eu) or [declined@insuranceireland.eu](mailto:declined@insuranceireland.eu).

## Tax Reliefs

202. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance if a Revenue Commissioners relevant contracts tax refund will be paid to a self-employed person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42560/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Section 530P of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 precludes Revenue from issuing a refund of Relevant Contracts Tax (RCT) until the income tax return for the relevant year (or the Corporation Tax return for the relevant accounting period of a company) has been filed and all associated liabilities discharged. However, the RCT refund is available for offset against other tax liabilities that may arise.

I am advised by Revenue that the person in question is seeking a refund of RCT in respect of the periods July and August 2021. In accordance with the legislation, it is not possible for Revenue to process such a refund until the 2021 income tax return is filed (due by 31 October 2022), an assessment raised, and any liabilities discharged. However, the refund amount is available to

offset against any other tax liabilities that arise for the person during the interim period.

Revenue has confirmed that it has already clarified the position to the person.

### Vehicle Registration Tax

203. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance if it is possible for a person to appeal a decision on vehicle registration tax (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42568/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that any person who wishes to appeal against the refusal of a VRT exemption can avail of a two-stage appeal process. The first-stage appeal consists of a re-examination of the original decision by a Revenue official who had no previous involvement with the case. If the appellant is still unhappy following the outcome of that re-examination, there is the option to submit a further appeal (known as second-stage appeal) to the independent Tax Appeals Commission.

The person involved must pay the VRT before an appeal can be considered; where an appeal is successful, Revenue will refund the appropriate VRT amount to the taxpayer.

Before making an appeal, the person involved should be satisfied that all the facts of the case were available to Revenue in coming to its initial decision, and that all the necessary supporting documents were submitted at the time of the initial application. In cases where there has been a refusal to grant an exemption from VRT, the person involved has two months after the date of the initial decision to make an appeal.

The appeal, along with the appropriate documentation, should be made in writing to Revenue's Central Vehicle Office. The appellant must quote either their Personal Public Service Number (PPSN) or their Revenue Customer Number. The appeal must clearly outline the grounds or the reason for the appeal.

For private individuals transferring normal residence permanently to the State from abroad, certain requirements must be met to avail of the Transfer of Residence relief, including an ability to demonstrate the vehicle has been in the claimant's possession and used by the claimant for at least six months before transfer of residence. Certain proofs are acceptable to Revenue to demonstrate possession and use by the claimant. A failure to provide acceptable proofs will result in not qualifying for Transfer of Residence relief and not obtaining the requested VRT exemption.

The Deputy may wish to be aware that further information on the VRT appeals process and details about eligibility for the Transfer of Residence relief is available on the Revenue website.

### Tax Data

204. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Finance the total amount collected by local authorities through local property tax for 2019. [42574/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that information relating to Local Property Tax (LPT) can be found on the statistics webpage of the Revenue website [www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/local-property-tax/index.aspx](http://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/local-property-tax/index.aspx).

The end of year reports at this link include both the overall annual LPT yields and the breakdown of these amounts by Local Authority area for each year since the tax was introduced in 2013.

### **Tax Data**

205. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the total value of qualifying expenditure against which capital allowances, including wear and tear allowances, were claimed with respect to data centres in each of the years 2015 to 2020, in tabular form. [42672/21]

206. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the number of data centres for which capital allowances were claimed for each of the years 2015 to 2020. [42673/21]

207. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the total tax revenue foregone in each of the years 2015 to 2020 with respect to capital allowances, including wear and tear allowances, claimed with respect to data centres, in tabular form. [42674/21]

208. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated revenue that would be saved in 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025, respectively, if expenditure incurred with respect to data centres was no longer qualifying expenditure for the purposes of capital allowances. [42675/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 205 to 298, inclusive, together.

Businesses may claim capital allowances on capital expenditure it incurs on certain types of business assets and business premises. Capital allowances allow the wear and tear of plant and machinery be taken into account as a deduction for tax purposes. In general, such capital allowances are claimed at a rate of 12.5% annually, over eight years.

I am advised by Revenue that data centres are not separately identifiable on Revenue records. Nor is information captured on the nature of the claims for capital allowances by data centres in a manner that would enable the Deputy's questions on specific activities to be answered.

Revenue's annual paper on Corporation Tax Payments and Returns provides information in respect of capital allowances claimed by the wider Information and Communication sector. Figure 6 of this paper provides a sectoral breakdown of capital allowances claimed on 2019 corporation tax returns. which may be of interest to the Deputy.

The paper is available on the Revenue website at: [www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/research/ct-analysis-2021.pdf](http://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/research/ct-analysis-2021.pdf).

*Question No. 206 answered with Question No. 205.*

*Question No. 207 answered with Question No. 205.*

*Question No. 208 answered with Question No. 205.*

*Question No. 209 answered with Question No. 188.*

### **Financial Instruments**

210. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if an increase in the rate of VAT for the hospitality and tourism sector from 9 to 13.5% has been included in the projections outlined in the Summer Economic Statement or whether extending the 9% rate, for the duration of 2022, would need to be included as a stand-alone measure with cost in budget 2022; and the cost of same. [42725/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy will be aware Budget 2021 provided for a reduction in the rate of VAT from 13.5% to 9% for Hospitality and Tourism related services and goods. This was a temporary measure to provide support for 14 months from 1 November 2020 to the end 2021. The measure is being extended to 31 August 2022 in recognition of the continuing challenges facing the Hospitality and Tourism sector.

While temporary, this measure will still provide support for a further 8 months to the start of September 2022, the end of the 2022 summer season, allowing for a longer period of recovery for the sector. It exists alongside other measures and will directly support businesses and jobs.

I can confirm that the cost of extending the 9% reduction in VAT to 31 August 2022 has been accounted for in the Summer Economic Statement. The estimate for the cost of extending this reduction to the end of 2022 is €130m.

*Question No. 211 answered with Question No. 188.*

### **Insurance Industry**

212. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Finance the reason young drivers in certain counties pay extremely high insurance premiums especially the counties Limerick and Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42854/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** At the outset, it is important to note that neither the Minister for Finance, nor the Central Bank of Ireland, has any influence over the pricing or provision of insurance products, as this is a commercial matter assessed on a case-by-case basis. This position is reinforced by the EU legislative framework for insurance (the Solvency II Directive).

Motor insurers use a combination of rating factors in making their individual decisions on whether to offer cover and what terms to apply. Factors include those such as: the drivers age, experience and number of drivers; vehicle age and type; the relevant claims record; how the vehicle is used, etc. Insurers do not all use the same combination of rating factors, and as a result prices vary across the market. Consumers are accordingly free to choose whatever product best meets their needs, with price obviously being a relevant factor. Insurance companies also price in accordance with their own past claims experience.

Notwithstanding the above, seeking to secure a more sustainable and competitive market through deepening and widening the supply of insurance in Ireland remains a key policy priority for this Government. It is my intention, along with Minister of State Fleming, to work to ensure that the commitments outlined in the Programme for Government are progressed in accordance with the Action Plan for Insurance Reform. As the Deputy may be aware, the Cabinet Committee Insurance Reform Sub-Group in July published the first six-monthly Implementation Report of the Action Plan. This shows that work is progressing well to implement these important reforms, with 34 of the 66 actions now completed. The Sub-Group's focus now is on implementing the outstanding actions on time.

In relation to motor insurance prices more generally, I would note that, according to Central

Statistics Office (CSO) data for July 2021, motor insurance prices are continuing to decline. Motor insurance prices in June were 34.7% lower than their peak in July 2016; and 5.7% lower than when the Government's Cabinet Committee Sub-Group on Insurance Reform was established in September 2020. It is the Government's intention that this positive downward trend continues as the reform agenda progresses.

I would like to assure the Deputy that work remains ongoing across Government to deliver further elements of the Action Plan, including measures to reform the Personal Injuries Assessment Board, reduce fraud, and make changes to the duty of care in order to strengthen waivers and notices. It is my hope that the implementation of these key actions in particular should further help to improve the affordability and availability of insurance for all consumers, businesses and voluntary groups – including young drivers in particular.

### **Tax Data**

213. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Finance if he will address a series of matters concerning refunded exit taxes (details supplied). [42857/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that Section 189 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (TCA) exempts permanently incapacitated individuals from Income Tax, Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI), Universal Social Charge (USC) and Capital Gains Tax on the income arising and gains accruing from the investment, in whole or in part, of compensation payments which arise from an order under section 38 of the Personal Injuries Assessment Board Act 2003 or the institution by the individual of court proceedings in respect of personal injury claims. The injury must be such that the individual is permanently and totally incapacitated from maintaining himself or herself.

Furthermore, section 739G TCA applies an exit tax to collective investment undertakings and is generally deducted on the occurrence of a chargeable event. Such chargeable events can arise on the making of relevant payments or on the transfer by a unit holder of their entitlement to units (including on death). An exit tax must always be deducted from payments to investors with the exception of specific categories of investors such as a pension scheme, a life assurance company or a non-resident individual, provided the investment undertaking is in possession of the appropriate declarations in advance of the chargeable event.

A permanently incapacitated individual who is exempt from tax under section 189 on income from the investment of compensation payments arising from personal injury claims may be entitled to a repayment of the exit tax. Revenue confirmed a refund of exit tax has occurred in such circumstances, where the requirements of section 189 have been met. However, where income or gains arise to, or are received by, the estate of a deceased individual, the exemption provided for in section 189 would not apply in those circumstances and consequently the repayment of any exit tax deducted cannot be made by Revenue.

As Revenue was never entitled to make repayments of the exit tax that arises under section 739G TCA to the estate of a deceased individual and there has been no change in the law to permit such refunds, I am advised that there has been no change in Revenue's practice in relation to these matters.

### **Government Communications**

214. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Finance if his ministerial phones have

been hacked or attempted to be hacked during the term of office. [42924/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I wish to indicate to the Deputy that to my knowledge, I am not aware of any instance of a hack on my Ministerial phone.

The Department's ICT providers (the Office of the Government's Chief Information Officer [OGCIO]) have deployed a multi layered approach to security, with defence-in-depth comprising of people, process and technology to protect against cyber security attacks.

For operational security reasons, my Department is not in a position to provide further details of its cyber security systems as it would be inappropriate to disclose information that may in any way assist those with malicious intent.

### Government Communications

215. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Finance if he has ever used his personal phones for Government business; and if so, if the personal phones have been hacked during his term of office. [42942/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I can confirm to the Deputy that I do not use a personal phone for Government business.

I also wish to indicate to the Deputy that to my knowledge, I am not aware of any instance of a hack on my phone.

### Freedom of Information

216. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Finance the number of freedom of information requests responded to by his Department in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; the number of responses that included documents related to text messages and other phone message communications such as messages sent through an application (details supplied), in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42964/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department supplies annual statistics in relation to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests which are granted and part granted to the Office of the Information Commissioner (OIC). The OIC publishes this information online. Annual reports can be found on the OIC website through the following link: [www.oic.ie/publications/annual-reports/](http://www.oic.ie/publications/annual-reports/).

My Department does not retain statistics concerning the source, or classification of individual records contained in the decisions of FOI requests.

However, I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department publishes a Disclosure Log of FOI requests processed in each quarter and my Department's Disclosure Logs are available through the following link: [www.gov.ie/en/collection/19fcb4-foi-decisions/](http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/19fcb4-foi-decisions/).

Furthermore, the following table outlines the amount of FOI decisions granted and part granted by my Department in the period from 2016 to date.

Year	Total Requests Received	Granted	Part Granted
2016	405	91	162
2017	406	72	150

Year	Total Requests Received	Granted	Part Granted
2018	384	40	183
2019	425	45	193
2020	274	27	127
2021 – to date	174	13	66

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

217. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance the advice he can provide on a matter (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42979/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), which is provided by Section 11 of the Finance Act 2020, was introduced to support businesses (companies, self-employed individuals and partnerships) significantly affected by restrictions introduced by the Government to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. The CRSS operates on a self-assessment basis, and claimants are required to satisfy themselves that they are correctly eligible for the scheme before registering to receive payments. Claimants are also required to review their continued eligibility for the scheme before making a claim for payment in respect of each subsequent claim period.

To qualify for the CRSS, a 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, requiring it to prohibit or considerably restrict customers from accessing its premises. It is not sufficient that a business experiences a reduction in demand for its services or a reduced footfall because of Covid-19 measures. For example, dry cleaning and laundry businesses were not required to restrict customer access under the public health measures and as such do not qualify for the CRSS, even if service demand is reduced. Such businesses may however qualify for the other support schemes introduced to support them during the pandemic.

I am advised by Revenue that the business in question operates a dry-cleaning service and incorrectly claimed and received CRSS payments to which it was not entitled, which must be repaid in due course. Revenue has also confirmed that it accepts that the business genuinely believed that it qualified for the scheme and that repayment of the amount owed as a single payment could cause it financial difficulties. To avoid such a scenario to the greatest extent possible, Revenue will engage directly with the business to agree a suitable payment solution, including the possibility of adding the amount owed to its current warehoused debt under the Debt Warehousing Scheme, even though that scheme does not specifically provide for CRSS related liabilities.

The company may be also eligible to register for the new Business Resumption Support Scheme (BRSS), which is an additional support for businesses with reduced turnover due to COVID-19 related restrictions. Further details on the BRSS, which is now operational, are available on the Revenue website.

Finally, Revenue has confirmed that in addition to receiving financial support through the Debt Warehousing Scheme, the Business is also receiving payments under the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS).

### **Commissions of Investigation**

218. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Finance the cost of each commission of investigation under the remit of his Department over the preceding decade. [42992/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I wish to inform the Deputy that there have not been any commissions of investigation under the remit of my Department over the preceding decade.

### **Ministerial Appointments**

219. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Finance the number of formal and informal roles held by a person (details supplied) in the name of his Department or associated agency in the lifetime of this Government; when the person was appointed to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43037/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I wish to advise the Deputy that the named individual has not held any formal or informal roles in the name of my Department, or any of the bodies under the aegis of my Department, during the lifetime of this Government.

### **Tax Code**

220. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department has carried out research to examine the revenue raised by other states from the issuing of personalised number plates and vehicle registration plates; and if he has plans to introduce such a system here. [43054/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that the specification for the identification mark (the “registration plate”) that must be displayed on all vehicles is contained in the Vehicle Registration and Taxation Regulations, 1992 (S.I. No. 318 of 1992). These Regulations do not permit personalised registration plates.

The existing identification mark is integral to the operations of a number of agencies apart from Revenue, including An Garda Síochána, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, the Road Safety Authority and the National Roads Authority. Any change to the existing specification could only be undertaken after an assessment of the impact of such changes, including in relation to the systems and other changes that would be required.

There is provision that the Commissioners may assign to a vehicle a registration number reserved by the owner on payment of a fee of €1,000, but this registration number must also comply with the format prescribed in S.I. No. 318 of 1992. Apart from this facility to reserve a registration number, there is no scope within the current legislation to provide for a personalised number scheme. This issue has been raised a number of times over the years but the systems development required, including to registration plate recognition systems, would be likely to far outweigh the potential benefits to the Exchequer.

I am advised by Revenue that there are no plans to undertake such a review.

### **Telecommunications Services**

221. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance if he and or his special advisers and-or officials use or have used services (details supplied) to communicate in the past 18 months. [43071/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I wish to inform the Deputy that I use Signal in my capacity as President of Eurogroup. An account was created following my election as President of Eurogroup, in line with a general recommendation on the use of messaging services by EU institutions.

Neither of my advisers have utilised either service.

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

222. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the projected cost of extending the employment wage subsidy scheme in its current form until 31 March 2022 and 30 June 2022, respectively. [43168/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am informed that, on an indicative basis and assuming that all other elements remain broadly equal, it is estimated very roughly that the cost of extending the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme in its current form would be of the order of €1.4 billion per quarter for each full quarter out to end-June 2022.

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

223. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the projected cost of extending the employment wage subsidy scheme in its current form until 31 March 2022 and then from 1 April 2022 to 30 June 2022 with eligibility criteria amended such that businesses qualify in circumstances in which they have experienced a 50% reduction in turnover in the relevant period and reduced rates as in a table (details supplied). [43169/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am informed that, on an indicative basis and assuming that all other elements remain broadly equal, it is estimated very roughly that the cost of extending the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme in its current form would be of the order of €1.4 billion per quarter for Q4, 2021 and Q1, 2022.

I am further informed that extending the scheme in Q2, 2022 using the rate structure outlined in the correspondence provided by the Deputy is very roughly estimated to cost of the order of €1 billion for the quarter. However, this estimate is provided on the basis that, with the exception of the reduced rates, all other elements of the scheme remain broadly the same.

It is not possible to estimate even indicatively the impact which a change in turnover criteria as outlined by the Deputy would have on the above rough estimate for Q2, 2022. The reason for this is that employers are not required to report their turnover reduction to Revenue to avail of EWSS. As such, no turnover data are held that would enable the impact to be quantified in cost terms.

*Question No. 224 answered with Question No. 194.*

*Question No. 225 answered with Question No. 194.*

*Question No. 226 answered with Question No. 194.*

### **Tax Code**

227. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Finance if consideration has been afford-

ed to increasing the fishers' tax credit and the seafarers' allowance for crewmen to incentivise more workers into the industry; if consideration has been afforded to further tax incentives for crewmen on Irish fishing vessels to address worker shortages within the industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43191/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Section 472B of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 provides for the Seafarers' Allowance and section 472BA provides for the Fisher Tax Credit. The incentives are intended to support those working in the commercial maritime sector.

The Seafarers' Allowance provides an allowance of €6,350 to individuals working in the shipping transport sector. It is an approved EU State Aid that is available under EU Community Guidelines on State Aid to Maritime Transport. Fishing activities are specifically excluded in these guidelines, therefore it is not possible to extend the Seafarers Allowance to fishers.

The Fisher Tax Credit is aimed at assisting the viability of the fishing sector and at attracting and retaining workers in the industry. The tax credit is worth €1,270 and applies to qualifying fishers who spend at least 80 days per year engaged in sea-fishing. The credit will act to shelter up to €6,350 of income from taxation, which is similar in value to the allowance provided under the seafarer's exemption.

In relation to the question of increasing these reliefs, or introducing further tax incentives, these are matters that would fall to be considered by Government in the context of the annual Budget and Finance Bill cycle.

In addition, proposals for tax expenditure measures are generally assessed in accordance with my Department's Tax Expenditure Guidelines.

However, I have no plans at the present time to introduce measures along the lines mentioned by the Deputy.

### **Departmental Regulations**

228. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the planned changes regarding SIPO rules and regulations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41443/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As the Deputy will be aware, this Government made a commitment in the 2020 Programme for Government to "reform and consolidate the Ethics in Public Office legislation", which is the statutory basis for the operations of the Standards in Public Office - SIPO.

To progress this commitment, the Government has recently agreed to a review of the Ethics Acts which my Department will undertake and which will inform legislative proposals for reform that I intend to bring forward next year. I expect this review to be finalised by end 2021.

In addition, my Department recently concluded an extensive review of the Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015, which is also administered by SIPO. In July, the Government agreed to the preparation of a General Scheme to amend the Act. The amendments to the Act will build on the existing strong legislative foundation and further strengthen Ireland's lobbying laws. In particular, the purpose of the amendments will be to:

- Improve the operation and functionality of the Lobbying Register;

- Strengthen the existing legislation and its enforcement;
- Make failure to comply with the post-term employment restrictions set out in section 22 of the Act a relevant contravention and offence under the Act.

Work on drafting this General Scheme has commenced in my Department and it is my intention to bring a finalised General Scheme to Government over the coming months.

### Office of Public Works

229. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if the Office of Public Works has plans for refurbishment works at any Garda stations within the J or R Districts over the next six months; and if so, the nature of such works. [41456/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** I can confirm that The Office of Public Works (OPW) have plans to carry out refurbishment works to the Garda Stations within the J and R Districts, the details of which are outlined in the following table. The table include works funded by both the OPW and An Garda Síochána and the commencement of these works is subject to successful tendering process.

In addition to the works in the table, the OPW continues to provide ongoing maintenance to all the Garda stations in the J and R Districts as required.

Garda Station	Nature of Works
Coolock GS	Canteen Refurbishment, internal painting, new flooring and fire doors upgrade.
Malahide GS	Maintenance works to the roof and external painting of the station
Swords GS	Discussions are underway in relation to the Car park layout - the works will be subject to planning and may not proceed within the next six months.
Howth GS	Currently planning Universal Access works for the station.
Clontarf GS	Repointing of boundary wall and general repairs to outhouses.

### Telecommunications Services

230. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will introduce a public sector email provider here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41555/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I do not plan to introduce a specific public sector email provider, as there are many free commercial offerings the public can use. However, in February of this year, I did announce the introduction of a State Digital Postbox, where individuals can, if they choose, receive their letters, documents, certificates and other messages from Government online.

### Departmental Staff

231. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the current policy regarding the employment of persons with disabilities in his Department and in each State and semi-State body under the aegis of his Department; the disability quota of his Department at present; if there is an active campaign to increase the disability workforce from the current target of 3% to a minimum of 6% by 2024; if this quota has now been exceeded; if

so, the details of same; if there has been an advertised competition relating to the quota; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41599/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, I have policy responsibility for recruitment to the Civil Service. The Civil Service is strongly committed to equality of opportunity for all in terms of its recruitment and employment practices. This commitment is demonstrated in the Civil Service 2030 Renewal Strategy which was launched in May 2021.

The Public Appointments Services (PAS), which is a body under the aegis of my Department, is the principal recruiter for the Civil Service. PAS plays a central role in attracting a diverse range of talented people from all backgrounds to take up employment opportunities in the Civil Service.

PAS has established a dedicated Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Unit and embedded Diversity Champions throughout the organisation. In March 2021, PAS launched its first Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2021-2023 following extensive and ongoing engagements with several non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Officials from my Department and from PAS sit on the Implementation Group for the National Comprehensive Employment Strategy for the Employment of People with Disabilities 2015-2024. This national strategy commits to increase the percentage of staff with a disability from 3% to 6% by 2024 (presently 3% under the Disability Act 2005). This employment target is monitored by the National Disability Authority (NDA) under Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005. At the end of 2019, 5.1% of civil servants self-declared as having a disability. Returns have recently been collated from all Civil Service bodies for 2020 to inform the preparation of the Part 5 Disability Monitoring Report for the Public Service that is prepared by the NDA for publication on its website.

There are many positive examples under CES of how my Department, working alongside key stakeholders in the Civil Service including PAS, has been involved in promoting civil service employment pathways for persons with a disability. These include the following:

In partnership with AHEAD, the Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) programme offers graduates with a disability a 6 month mentored paid work placement in either the private sector or Civil Service. My Department and PAS play a key role in driving the annual intakes of work placements across the Civil Service. To date, WAM has placed over 490 graduates, of which 47% (230) have been placements across 33 Departments/Offices. Over 80% of WAM graduates have subsequently secured longer-term employment upon completion of their WAM programme. Officials from my Department are presently scoping the possibility of a confined competition to create permanent civil service employment opportunities for graduates of the WAM programme.

The Oireachtas Work Learning (OWL) programme is an applied learning, development and socialisation programme for adults with an intellectual disability that was launched as a pilot programme in September 2018. It is facilitated by the Houses of the Oireachtas Service in collaboration with two sponsor organisations, KARE and WALK. The goal of the Programme is to provide trainees with the skills, knowledge and ability to gain meaningful employment via the unique opportunity to gain practical work experience, as well as accredited learning over an 11 month period. Over a quarter of the initial OWL interns have since gone on to secure permanent civil service employment through confined competitions.

In terms of civil servants based in my own Department, the HR Unit developed the *People@PER* HR Strategy that has a focus on embracing and embedding a culture of diversity and

inclusion across the Department through diversity initiatives and training. This has included the establishment of a vibrant cross-Divisional and cross-grade Diversity and Inclusion staff forum. My Department has a Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) who supports new members of staff with a disability or existing staff who acquire a disability and raise awareness about disability. New hires receive the Code of Practice for the Employment of People with a Disability in the Irish Civil Service, a welcome letter from the Department's DLO and FAQs on Disability prepared by the National Disability Authority. The induction of new hires includes a presentation and Q&A session with the DLO.

In September 2020, I published a State Bodies Code of Practice Annex of Gender Balance, Diversity & Inclusion. This requires the Chairperson of each board to submit a comprehensive report to the relevant Minister each year that must set out progress in addressing gender, equality and diversity issues.

In terms of bodies under my aegis, all have appointed Disability Liaison Officers (DLOs) and have proactively made available work placement opportunities for participants on the WAM and OWL programmes, with a number of these being converted to permanent positions. Embedding diversity and inclusion with each body is a core focus of the respective Management Boards with key ED&I initiatives reflected in existing local HR strategies or those being developed by bodies, such as the EMPOWER People Strategy in the case of the Office of Government Procurement.

I am committed to ensuring that we continue to build a diverse Civil Service that is reflective of the modern Ireland that we serve.

### **Office of Public Works**

232. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will provide all documentation and engagement the OPW has had with the local authority and any other entity, private or public, following weather events in February 2021 (details supplied). [41616/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The Office of Public Works is not in a position to provide the documentation as requested by the Deputy in this format but can provide the following update on developments since the flood event in Fermoy in February.

The Fermoy North flood defence scheme construction commenced in 2009 and was completed in 2011. The Scheme comprises grass embankments, permanent walls and demountable flood barriers and pumping stations and is designed to protect 77 properties on the north side of Fermoy against the 1-in-100-year flood event. Damages avoided in such an event in are in the order of €18m.

Cork Co. Council carries out the operation and maintenance of the Fermoy North scheme on behalf of OPW, the Contracting Authority. An OPW-developed Flood Early Warning System (FEWS), which is used for both the towns of Fermoy and Mallow, is operated by Cork County Council staff in Mallow. Upon receipt of a flood warning, Local Authority staff erect the substantial demountable defences on the completed scheme on the north side.

The flood event which occurred in Fermoy on the night of 22 and morning of 23 February led to three properties flooding on Brian Ború Square and flooding in the Town Park area, although no properties flooded there.

Cork County Council, in conjunction with OPW, have been investigating the possible cause or causes which led to the February flood event, including investigations regarding the functioning of the pumping stations, at both Rathealy Road, and the Western Embankment.

Currently a specialist is engaged to provide a full comprehensive diagnostic analysis of both Fermoy North pumping stations. This analysis will aim to determine what occurred in February and to establish if all the original pumping systems are functioning correctly (as designed), and if not to provide appropriate recommendations to rectify any outstanding issues.

In the interim, Cork Co. Council and OPW have put in measures to prevent an event such as February happening again and following completion of the investigations will carry out any required works to remedy any outstanding issues.

### **Flood Risk Management**

233. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if an environmental impact assessment was undertaken in respect of the Lough Funshinagh flood scheme; if planning permission was obtained for this project and if the project was put to tender. [41694/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** Roscommon County Council had taken the decision to proceed with urgent works in response to high water levels at Lough Funshinagh under the provisions contained in the Local Authorities (Works) Act 1949. As the responsibility for environmental assessments and planning lies with the Council, I have asked Roscommon County Council to contact you directly.

### **Departmental Bodies**

234. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the estimated cost for a new ombudsman for older persons. [41765/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The Government has no plans at this point to establish an ombudsman for older persons. It would fall to the relevant Minister with responsibility for policy regarding older persons to consider and to bring forward such a proposal. The costs related to such an establishment would be estimated at that time. I would like to point out to the Deputy that older persons are entitled to use the services of all existing Ombudsman offices for any complaint regarding the manner in which public services are provided.

### **Office of Public Works**

235. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans in 2021 to install benches in an area (details supplied); and if no plans for the installation of benches is being considered, he will commit to carrying out an evaluation and-or survey regarding their requirement from regular users of the facility. [41848/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The Office of Public Works has attempted to ensure good provision of benches and seating at Castletown Estate in recent years, however, all previous efforts to install

benches in the Castletown demesne were abandoned due to repeated acts of vandalism.

Please be advised that local management continues to seek to address this issue and is examining the possibility of installing benches in areas where they would be less vulnerable to anti-social behaviour.

### **An Garda Síochána**

236. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to reopen or develop a Garda station in County Wicklow (details supplied); if not, if he will consider allowing the use of the premises to a community group in the area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41857/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** I am advised by the Commissioners of Public Works that An Garda Síochána notified the Office of Public Works (OPW) on the 6th August 2021 that there are no plans to redevelop the Garda station in Ashford, Co. Wicklow. The Garda station has been unoccupied since it was extensively damaged in 2003.

In line with the OPW's policy for vacant and surplus properties, the Garda station in Ashford will now be prepared for disposal.

The OPW's disposals policy with regard to non-operational (vacant) State property including the former Garda station in Ashford is to:

Identify if the property is required/suitable for alternative State use by either Government Departments or the wider public sector.

If there is no other State use identified for a property, the OPW will then consider disposing of the property on the open market if and when conditions prevail, in order to generate revenue for the Exchequer.

If no State requirement is identified, or if a decision is taken not to dispose of a particular property, the OPW may consider community involvement (subject to a detailed written submission, which would indicate that the community/voluntary group has the means to insure, maintain and manage the property and that there are no ongoing costs for the Exchequer).

### **Departmental Expenditure**

237. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his Department was consulted in relation to and or approved payments, expenses and or other benefits including pension terms for a person (details supplied) for any work or roles undertaken on behalf of the Government or any of its agencies; if so, the timeframe, amounts and allowances involved in each case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41910/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** No request for expenditure approval was received by my Department in relation to either the role of UN special envoy or the person identified. In general, staffing matters are managed by Departments within overall expenditure ceilings.

In the normal course of events, my Department is available to assist other Departments with the range of technical queries that can often arise with many individual posts including

the position of Special Envoy. In this case there was contact from the Department of Foreign Affairs on 26 July requesting clarifications on pension issues. These queries were subsequently withdrawn.

### Flexible Work Practices

238. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the measures he is taking to promote or facilitate remote working for staff in his Department or bodies under the aegis of his Department; the costs this has generated in terms of the provision of laptops, desktop computers or contributions to wi-fi costs or phone-related expenses; the number of staff who have applied for permission to work from home on a permanent or hybrid-model basis (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41958/21]

248. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the steps being taken to facilitate remote working within his Department in particular to encourage remote working for those who live in the regions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42712/21]

249. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the way in which his Department and public bodies and agencies under his remit are accommodating requests for persons to work from home. [42762/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 238, 248 and 249 together.

I wish to advise the Deputy that Government Departments and Offices are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies, including by my own Department, that are tailored to the specific requirements of each Department / Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

The Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO) has enabled the staff of my Department and the Office of Government Procurement, which is also part of my Department, to work from home since March 2020, through the sourcing, procurement and supporting of laptops and software licences. Since the pandemic began, my Department had spent €250,000 moving staff to remote working which has enabled my Department to remain fully operational. The cost associated with the Office of Government Procurement is €197,000. The Deputy should note that a portion of these costs would have been spent through the natural IT infrastructure replacement of PCs and laptops.

There is no process currently in place in my Department or the bodies under the aegis of my Department that provide staff members to apply to work from home on a permanent or hybrid-model basis. However, this process is being developed presently and will be available to staff, including those living in regional areas, in the coming months.

The requested costs in relation to the bodies under the aegis of my Department is set out below.

Public Body	Associated Remote Working costs to date
Office of Public Works (OPW)	€795,000
National Shared Services Office (NSSO)	€729,960

Public Body	Associated Remote Working costs to date
Public Appointments Service (PAS)	€163,977
Office of the Ombudsman	€175,500
State Laboratory	€30,880
Office of the National Lottery Regulator	€16,100

### An Garda Síochána

239. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if there are plans to make Athlone Garda station wheelchair accessible; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42000/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The refurbishment and extension works to Athlone Garda Station have been designed to make it wheelchair accessible which meets best practice accessibility provision and complies with the current Building Regulations.

### Defence Forces

240. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if a person who was a member of the Defence Forces can carry their Army service into the Civil Service for pension purposes if they take up a position in the Civil Service; if so, the arrangements that apply; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42003/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** A scheme for the transfer of pensionable service between the pre-existing (pre-2013) pension schemes of certain public sector bodies is facilitated by way of the Public Sector Transfer Network (PSTN).

That scheme has its origins in section 4 of the Superannuation and Pensions Act 1963, which provides that a person who is employed in a pensionable capacity in an “approved organisation”, may transfer pensionable service from one approved organisation to another. Collectively, these approved organisations make up the PSTN. The rules governing transfer of service in pre-existing public service pension schemes are primarily set out in a Department of Finance Letter to Personnel Officers (24 April 1979) - ‘Draft Transfer Scheme’ and also in a Letter to Personnel Officers (30 January 1981) - ‘Transfer of Service for Superannuation Purposes’.

For a transfer of pensionable service to be permitted, both bodies are required to be members of the PSTN and the eligibility criteria set out in the 1979 transfer scheme must be met. I can confirm that both the Civil Service and Defence Forces are members of the PSTN. Applications for transfers of service should be directed to the HR or pension administration section of the individual’s employer, who are best placed to advise on whether the relevant eligibility criteria are met and a transfer of service is permissible.

Please note that transfers of pensionable service can only take place between pre-existing pension schemes. The Single Scheme does not operate on the basis of “pensionable service” and is therefore not covered by the PSTN. The transfer provisions of that scheme relate to money amounts and are set out in DPER Circular 15/2019.

### Office of Public Works

241. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the costs incurred by the Office of Public Works in completing the scaffolding enabling investigative and entablature repairs works to the Four Courts dome that was completed by the end of July 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42029/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The Office of Public Works has undertaken an extensive programme of investigation, assessment and repairs to the Four Courts dome structure, including the dome, the decorative and supporting stone entablature and the capitals. It was necessary to have appropriate scaffolding in place to facilitate access, investigation, testing, analysis, assessment and for undertaking works safely both internally and externally. The programme of works to the Four Courts dome includes:

- Repair/replacement of metal framing and fixing for the lathe and plaster dome ceiling
- Examination of the concrete dome and carry out necessary remediation work
- New lining to gutter at the base of the dome
- Installation of health and safety access system to dome gutters (incl fall arrest system) for future maintenance
- Replacement of lightning protection
- Assessment and repairs to entablature stonework
- Investigate, repair and/or replacement of stone capitals
- Investigate, assess and repair/replace the steel angle to circumference immediately over the capitals

The external scaffolding, that facilitated these works, is scheduled to be fully dismantled by end September 2021.

The total sum of expenditure, to date, on these works is €5,249,233.

Arising from the investigation and assessment works that have been undertaken, preparation of plans is underway in respect of proposed further works mainly on the stone capitals and steel angle to circumference.

### **Legislative Measures**

242. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if there are plans to reverse the financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI, cuts to the fees of barristers contracted by the State to defend and prosecute criminal law matters; if he plans to meet with representatives to discuss this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42030/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I fully acknowledge and appreciate the very important work undertaken by barristers who prosecute criminal work on behalf of the State and my Department has engaged constructively with key stakeholders including the Bar Council of Ireland, the Office of Director of Public Prosecutions and the Department of Justice in relation to this matter. In particular it has sought evidence to support any claims that the reductions imposed are linked to significant recruitment and reten-

tion issues, thereby potentially adversely impacting the administration of justice.

While my Department has not yet been provided with evidential data to support such claims, it remains available to review any further information that may be provided.

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

### **Departmental Reports**

243. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the progress that has been made on implementing the key recommendation from the 2020 Building Innovation Report to establish and fund a build digital centre of excellence to promote the use of building information modelling in the construction sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42143/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The Build Digital Project aims to ensure that world class digital practices, which already exist in certain elements of the Irish construction sector, are adopted throughout the industry and supply chain in order to achieve a more innovative sector from top to bottom. The project will provide guidance and leadership on the necessary digital tools, standards, approaches and training required by all across the construction sector, in particular the small- and medium-sized firms who may have yet to realise the full benefits of digital approaches.

The grant for Build Digital is being administered by my Department. In December 2020, as part of that process, a competitive, challenge-based grant call was launched which invited bidders to deliver the Build Digital Project with up to €2.5 million in public funding over the next five years.

The preferred bidder was chosen in April 2021 with the official launch of the project planned to take place in Autumn 2021.

### **Public Procurement Contracts**

244. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if consideration is being given to making the use of building information modelling mandatory in public procurement construction contracts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42144/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Building Information Modelling (BIM) has the potential to transform the processes surrounding project and data management on construction projects and can drive significant efficiencies. It offers industry the opportunity to rationalise its working methods, reduce waste and explore opportunities for off-site production. These all contribute to a leaner and safer project delivery making the industry a more attractive proposition from an investment and recruitment perspective. For clients it can transform both the construction and operational phases delivering greater project certainty.

In July 2017 the Government approved a high-level strategy for the adoption of BIM on public sector construction projects to ensure a consistent and coherent approach to the application of BIM across the public sector. The timing of any mandatory requirements for BIM adop-

tion on public works projects is considered to be dependent on the level of supports available to both clients and industry to mitigate the disruption to project delivery that accompanies digital transition in any sector.

The National BIM Council's 'Roadmap to Digital Transition' published in December 2017 highlighted the dependencies on the journey to digital transition including standards, training and procurement.

Since the development of the strategy in 2017 the International Organisation Standards (ISO) has published a range of standards for BIM. The National Standards Authority of Ireland, through the work of its BIM mirror group, has developed the important national annexes that sit under the ISO standard to enable a consistent approach to the delivery of BIM in Ireland and for Irish businesses compete in a worldwide market.

Innovation and digital adoption have been highlighted as key to improving productivity by the Construction Sector Group (CSG) in their report 'Building Innovation' published in June 2020. A range of actions were identified in the report which are aimed at driving digital adoption in the sector.

The CSG established the Innovation and Digital Adoption Sub-Group to implement the actions and one of the key enablers of digital adoption is the implementation of the Build Digital Project. In December 2020 my department launched a competitive challenge-based grant call to deliver the Build Digital Project for the Construction Sector in 2021. The process has almost concluded and an announcement on the organisation that will establish the Build Digital Project will be announced shortly.

Once the Build Digital Project is established an implementation strategy for a phased adoption of BIM on public works projects will be published. The strategy will recognise the varying BIM skills that currently exist and will introduce a steadily increasing demand for BIM delivery to enable industry to upskill and recruit the necessary resources. BIM will be phased into public works projects over a four-year period commencing with the large-scale projects initially as the larger technical consultancies and contractors already have the capacity to deliver BIM.

### **Commissions of Investigation**

245. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the cost of each commission of investigation under the remit of his Department over the preceding decade. [42150/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I wish to inform the Deputy that my Department has not been responsible for the setting up of any Commission of Investigation since its establishment in 2011.

*Question No. 246 withdrawn.*

### **Community Employment Schemes**

247. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his views on an issue (details supplied) in relation to a premises for a community employment scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42684/21]

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

**rick O'Donovan):** I have been advised by officials at my department that Kilgarvan Community Development CLG, which operates the CE scheme, has recently been granted a two year licence for the use of the former Garda station, and they have indicated they are happy with the arrangement.

I understand they were previously offered the use of a room on the ground floor of the Community Centre (former National school) but deemed it unsuitable.

The lease on the Community Centre is currently the subject of a query with the Chief State Solicitors Office and my officials expect to have an update on this shortly.

*Question No. 248 answered with Question No. 238.*

*Question No. 249 answered with Question No. 238.*

### **Flood Risk Management**

250. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the completion of the flood relief scheme in Bantry, County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42800/21]

251. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the completion of the flood relief scheme in Skibbereen County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42801/21]

252. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the completion of the flood relief scheme in Bandon, County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42802/21]

253. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the completion of the flood relief scheme in Clonakilty, County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42803/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 250 to 253, inclusive, together.

**Bantry:**

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

On 11th March 2021 Cork County Council, as the Sponsoring Authority and in partnership with the OPW issued the tender documentation for the procurement of Engineering Consultants via [www.etenders.gov.ie](http://www.etenders.gov.ie). Tenders were returned on 30th July 2021 and are currently being assessed.

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

invasive species in preparation for a flood relief scheme for the town.

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

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

In March 2021, an application under the Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Scheme for interim works to mitigate flooding in Bantry, which includes installation of non-return valves and provision of mobile pumps, was submitted to the OPW by Cork County Council. Further information was requested from the Council to facilitate full consideration of the proposal. This information has now been received. The OPW are currently reviewing the application and a decision is expected to issue in the coming weeks.

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

**Skibbereen:**

The Skibbereen Flood Relief Scheme was substantially completed on 6th June 2019. All identified defects arising from the construction have been remedied, with some delays as a result of Covid-19.

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

In addition, some drainage works on Cork Road, which fall outside the remit of the main Scheme, have subsequently been identified as being necessary. Detailed assessments are currently being progressed by Cork County Council and consultants RPS, in conjunction with the OPW and Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), to identify the most effective solution. While work is currently ongoing on the development of a solution, the Council is not yet in a position to confirm the programme times in relation to planning approvals and construction.

Following the flood event, which occurred in August, 2020 in the Rossa Road area, Cork County Council and its consultants have been undertaking assessments of the problem and these assessments are progressing. The OPW is providing funding under the Minor Works & Flood Mitigation Scheme towards these works, which involve the upgrade of the Rossa Road culvert trash screen and inlet chamber. Some discussions have taken place with a local landowner with a view to completing some remedial/improvement works. Any further works can only be progressed once the required reports are completed.

**Bandon:**

The Bandon Flood Relief Scheme was substantially completed on 16th October 2020.

A number of additional minor items are still planned to be completed, such as fencing, rail-

ings and conservation works to Bandon Bridge.

Work is ongoing on preparing the operation and maintenance plans for the scheme and it is envisaged that the maintenance and operation of the scheme will be carried out for and on behalf of the OPW by Cork County Council.

As part of the completed Bandon flood relief scheme, the Office of Public Works installed a large ‘rock-ramp’ fish pass in the Bandon River, measuring some 130m, in October 2018. The fish pass was designed by international experts, with input from national experts in the then Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (DECLH), along with Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI).

In March 2021, the OPW became aware that the boulders, rock and gravel material that formed the bed of the ramp had deteriorated, possibly as a result of extreme flows in the river in February 2021. The OPW immediately carried out inspections, accompanied by IFI representatives and the fisheries’ specialist on the Project which identified serious deterioration of the rock and gravel bed materials used in the construction of the fish pass, over its full length. Of immediate concern was the erosion of bed material at the upstream end of the fish pass, which had resulted in the retaining wall, originally constructed below the bed level of the pass, becoming exposed and creating a ‘step’ up from the bed level immediately downstream of it, which was creating serious difficulties for various aquatic species in migrating over this newly exposed ‘step’ at the upstream end of the fish pass, particularly in low flows.

The OPW and IFI agreed that urgent measures were required to alleviate this problem, which, following all appropriate assessments and approvals, were carried out successfully.

While these emergency works were critical in solving the immediate problem, an investigation into the reasons for the deterioration of the bed material on the fish pass is ongoing and a longer term solution will be developed with a view to fully rectifying the issue with the carrying out of any necessary works when the investigations are completed.

#### Clonakilty:

The Clonakilty Flood Relief Scheme undertaken by the Office of Public Works in partnership with Cork County Council was substantially completed on 4th February 2021 by the main contractor, Ward and Burke Ltd and now provides protection to 296 properties.

A number of works to address outstanding items and snags to be completed by the contractor are currently ongoing.

Planning for the operation and maintenance of the scheme is ongoing in conjunction with Cork County Council, who will act as agents of the OPW in carrying out the statutory operation and maintenance of the scheme.

*Question No. 251 answered with Question No. 250.*

*Question No. 252 answered with Question No. 250.*

*Question No. 253 answered with Question No. 250.*

### **Brexit Supports**

254. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the overall amount of the Brexit Adjustment Reserve Fund for Ireland; the percentage of

this to be allocated to the seafood sector in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42827/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Ireland is expected to receive a total allocation of €1.065 billion in 2018 prices (equivalent to €1.165 billion in current prices) from the Brexit Adjustment Reserve (BAR), comprised of €991 million in pre-financing, and a further €74 million in 2025. Expenditure under the Reserve must demonstrate a direct link to the negative impact of the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union. The eligibility period for the Reserve runs from 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2023.

The BAR Regulation requires that a minimum amount must be ring-fenced to support the fisheries sector, although that amount may be exceeded. For Ireland, the minimum amount that must be ring-fenced is €56 million (2018 prices). Details of BAR expenditure will be announced in due course.

### **Departmental Expenditure**

255. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his Department approved the expenditure associated with the role of government UN Special Envoy on Freedom of Expression proposed by the Department of Foreign Affairs, the details of any communications between his Department and the Department of Foreign Affairs in regard to this post; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42831/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** No request for expenditure approval was received by this Department in relation to either the role of UN special envoy or the person identified. In general, staffing matters are managed by Departments within overall expenditure ceilings.

In the normal course of events, my Department is available to assist other Departments with the range of technical queries that can often arise with many individual posts including the position of Special Envoy. In this case there was contact from the Department of Foreign Affairs on 26 July requesting clarifications on pension issues. These queries were subsequently withdrawn.

### **Government Communications**

256. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his Ministerial phones have been hacked or attempted to be hacked during the term of office. [42930/21]

257. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he has ever used his personal phones for Government business; and if so, if the personal phones have been hacked during his term of office. [42948/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 256 and 257 together.

I can confirm that there is no evidence to indicate that my ministerial mobile phone has been compromised or of any attempts to hack this phone.

I occasionally use my personal phone in the course of my official duties and the above posi-

tion also applies to this phone during my term of office.

*Question No. 257 answered with Question No. 256.*

### Office of Public Works

258. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if the OPW would see merits in a new forum to oversee the governance and management of all of Galway City's historic waterways in one unified structure; and if the OPW would work with Galway City Council and local stakeholders to do so. [42956/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The Office of Public Works is the lead agency for flood risk management in Ireland and is responsible for the development and implementation of flood risk policies and strategies.

The OPW, in partnership with Galway City Council, are currently progressing the development of a flood relief scheme for Galway City 'Corrib go Cósta' and following a tender process, consultants were appointed in November, 2020. Public and stakeholder engagement are key components of the overall communications strategy that has been developed for the scheme, which details proactive engagement with all key stakeholders with interest in Galway City and the Flood Relief Scheme. This engagement with significant stakeholders has commenced in addition to the first public engagement day which took place in June 2021.

The Galway Flood Relief Scheme, while primarily focused on addressing the sustainable and effective management of flood risk, shall also ensure that the design of any measures, in particular structural measures, takes cognisance of the sensitivity of the distinctive context of the city and a wide range of issues such as cultural heritage, biodiversity and public realm. This will involve significant engagement and collaboration with various stakeholders and will be an ongoing process throughout the development of the scheme.

The OPW would be happy to engage as appropriate with stakeholders with respect of the management of other elements of Galway City's waterways.

### Freedom of Information

259. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of freedom of information requests responded to by his Department in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; the number of responses that included documents related to text messages and other phone message communications such as messages sent through an application (details supplied) in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42970/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The information requested by the Deputy in relation to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests received and responded to by my Department in the specified period is set out in the table below.

Year	Number of Freedom of Information requests
2021 (to date)	178
2020	295
2019	306

Year	Number of Freedom of Information requests
2018	207
2017	247
2016	349

I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department does not capture details of the nature of documents issued to FOI requesters as part of its FOI processes and therefore cannot supply the information requested regarding the type of records.

### Ministerial Appointments

260. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of formal and informal roles held by a person (details supplied) in the name of his Department or associated agency in the lifetime of this Government; when they were appointed to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43041/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I wish to advise the Deputy that the person in question has not held a formal or informal role in the name of my Department, or the Office of Government Procurement which is also part of my Department, since the commencement of the 33rd Dáil. This is also the case in respect of the bodies under the aegis of my Department.

### Government Communications

261. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he and or his special advisors and or officials use or have used services (details supplied) to communicate in the past 18 months. [43077/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I wish to advise the Deputy neither I nor my advisors use either of the named applications. This is also the position with respect to members of the Department's Management Board.

A number of other Department officials do use one of the applications, Slack. The purpose of this application is to facilitate quick updates between external partners and internal teams on live ICT issues. In addition, as part of research conducted into secure solutions to enable continuity of communications in the event corporate communication tools were compromised, my ICT team did make limited use of Signal. All records are retained and searchable under FOI.

### Summer Economic Statement

262. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the measures included by cost, description and Department in the €8.1 billion in temporary spending for 2022 outlined in table 4 of the Summer Economic Statement 2021. [43182/21]

263. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the measures included in the employment wage subsidy scheme by cost, description and Department in the €5.3 billion in Covid-19 measures and contingency for 2022 outlined in table 8 non-core expenditure trajectory of the Summer Economic Statement 2021. [43183/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to

take Questions Nos. 262 and 263 together.

The Summer Economic Statement (SES) laid out up to €8.1 billion in 2022 for non-core, temporary spending under the overall expenditure ceiling. This €8.1 billion under ‘temporary spending’ heading in Table 4 of the SES is made up of the non-core expenditure areas listed Table 8, intended to address the specific challenges of Covid-19 and Brexit. This comprises €7 billion for measures in response to Covid-19 and Ireland’s €1.1 billion Brexit Adjustment Reserve allocation.

In addition to the €1.5 billion indicated for automatic stabilisers, primarily job-seekers payments, €5.3 billion is indicated as Covid-19 measures and contingency. This combines the €2.5 billion included in the Stability Programme Update to meet pressures that may remain in delivering public services in line with any continued public health requirements and the €2.8 billion contingency reserve set out in the SES. Given the continued uncertainty in relation to Covid-19 and the requirement to ensure that supports are carefully withdrawn in a manner that supports recovery in the economy, this contingency reserve will allow Government flexibility to respond as the situation with the virus evolves. A further €0.2 billion relates to funding under our National Recovery and Resilience Plan expected to be spent in 2022.

Further to this, Ireland has been allocated €1.1 billion under the EU’s Brexit Adjustment Reserve, to fund measures to address the negative impacts of Brexit across the eligible period of the fund. The full allocation has been assigned to 2022 on a technical basis. However, this funding will likely be allocated across Budget 2022 and Budget 2023.

Decisions on specific measures to be covered by this funding, including the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme, and allocations to Departments will be made as part of the Estimates process. As in 2021, it is intended that all expenditure allocations related to Covid-19 will be separately identified in the Expenditure Report to ensure transparency. *Question No. 263 answered with Question No. 262.*

### **Covid-19 Tests**

264. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when antigen testing will be rolled out as an option for access to indoor dining; the reason for delays in implementing antigen testing; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42683/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** At present, in line with public health-related Regulations, access to indoor dining may be granted to permitted persons with acceptable proof of immunity and also to children accompanying such permitted persons. However, as set out in Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting, the Government’s agreed plan for the next and final phase of our response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government hopes to be in a position from 22 October to remove remaining measures such as the legal requirement to prove immunity in order to access indoor hospitality.

The merits of possible application of antigen testing in settings such as indoor dining are being kept under review in my Department, informed by the work of the Rapid Testing Advisory Group chaired by Prof Mary Horgan. In the meantime, our primary focus is to continue with our careful and gradual approach to easing remaining restrictions and facilitating full reopening from 22 October, while supporting the maximum reach of the vaccine programme and allowing time to achieve the full benefits for all those currently being vaccinated.

**Departmental Staff**

265. **Deputy Fergus O’Dowd** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the current policy regarding the employment of persons with disabilities in her Department and in each State and semi-State body under the aegis of her Department; the disability quota of her Department at present; if there is an active campaign to increase the disability workforce from the current target of 3% to a minimum of 6% by 2024; if this quota has now been exceeded; if so, the details of same; if there has been an advertised competition in relation to the quota; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41602/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** My Department and agencies under its remit are governed by the Code of Practice for the Employment of People with a Disability in the Irish Civil Service.

My Department is required to provide information annually to the National Disability Authority (NDA) on the number of persons with disabilities employed on 31st December each year in both the Department and in agencies under its aegis.

The NDA has a statutory role in monitoring employment of persons with disabilities in the public sector, arising from Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005, and publishes the statistics provided on its website.

My Department conducted a Disability Staff Census for 2020 to assist monitoring of the number of employees with disabilities, as required under the Disability Act 2005. Almost 10% of staff in my Department self-identified as having a disability as defined by the Act, exceeding the 6% quota in the Comprehensive Strategy for People with Disabilities (2015-2024).

My Department has a strong record of employing persons with disabilities and is strongly committed to the development and implementation of improved measures to promote and support the employment of individuals with disabilities.

My Department is currently participating in the Oireachtas Work Learning Programme (OWL) for persons with intellectual disabilities and has also recruited three graduates with disabilities from the Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) work placement programme which aims to promote access to the labour market for graduates with disabilities and build the capacity of employers to integrate disability into the mainstream workplace. All staff have access to the Department’s Disability Liaison Officer who provides additional support to staff with disabilities on an ongoing basis.

Each public body under the aegis of the Department is responsible for ensuring they meet the annual statutory disability target. A Monitoring Committee has been established in my Department to monitor compliance of bodies under the aegis of the Department with Part 5 of the Disability Act, 2005 (Article 48). I am informed that a key objective of the Monitoring Committee is to support the public bodies meet the Government’s public service employment target for persons with disabilities. Below, detailed in tabular form are the statistics gathered and submitted to my Department for the 2020 Part 5 Returns for Public Bodies under the aegis of the Department. I understand these statistics will be published by the NDA in due course.

Name of Public Body	% (Highest to lowest)
Crawford Art Gallery	10.53%
Broadcasting Authority of Ireland	10.26%
National Library of Ireland	9.09%
Foras na Gaeilge(North South Body)	8.16%

Name of Public Body	% (Highest to lowest)
Ulster Scots Agency (North South Body)	7.69%
Údarás Na Gaeltachta	6.90%
National Gallery of Ireland	6.42%
RTÉ	4.88%
Irish Museum of Modern Art	4.76%
TG4	4.55%
National Museum of Ireland	4.00%
National Concert Hall	4.00%
Sport Ireland	3.92%
Arts Council	3.13%
Chester Beatty Library	2.22%
Fáilte Ireland	1.86%
Screen Ireland	0.00%
Tourism Ireland (North South Body)	0.00%

Appointments to posts in my Department are normally made from recruitment panels of the Public Appointments Service (PAS). I am informed that my Department actively seeks to accommodate new recruits with disabilities when such persons become available from PAS panels.

### Covid-19 Pandemic

266. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the position regarding the return of wheelchair hurling for fully vaccinated persons; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41634/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** In line with the recently published Government plan COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting, there will be a further easing of restrictions on organised indoor and outdoor sporting activities generally from 20 September, which will facilitate the resumption from that date of indoor sports such as wheelchair hurling in accordance with the conditions and limits specified in the Government's plan. The plan indicates a maximum of 100 participants (with appropriate protective measures) in such indoor sports if all participants are fully vaccinated. Further details and updated guidance will also be available from the specific National Governing Body (NGB) of wheelchair hurling. Sport Ireland maintains a close liaison with the various NGBs and provides guidance to them as required.

### Digital Archiving

267. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when she will report on the feasibility of establishing a digital legal deposit scheme for large-scale, systematic and sustained archiving of the Irish web domain as committed to in section 108 of the Copyright and Other Intellectual Property Law Provisions Act 2019; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41647/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** My Department is working with the National Library of Ireland (NLI) on exploring

the feasibility of expanding the NLI's capacity to establish a digital legal deposit scheme to serve as a web archive for the .ie domain and work is ongoing.

There are differing viewpoints on the introduction of digital legal deposit and it is important that consultations incorporate all viewpoints. It is hoped to bring forward a report in the coming months.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

268. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when live music will be permitted back in indoor hospitality; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41816/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** Under COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting, the Government's agreed plan for the next and final phase of our response to the COVID-19 pandemic, live music is permitted from 6 September in indoor hospitality settings having due regard to appropriate protective factors.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

269. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when a plan will be produced for safe reopening for staff, children and parents involved in the performing arts and a timeline for the safe resumption of indoor classes. [41826/21]

275. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she has a roadmap for when indoor classes will be allowed to resume; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42134/21]

277. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if one to one music classes are identified as a personal service; and if she will provide clarity on the return of one to one music classes under the current public health guidelines. [42203/21]

279. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will establish a framework that brings the public health restrictions on individual in-person music tuition in line with other sectors in order that students can attend classes as soon as possible; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42309/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 269, 275, 277 and 279 together.

On 31 August, the Government published a plan - COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting. The Government has agreed that during the period between 1 September and 22 October, we will continue our careful and gradual approach to reopening, while supporting maximum reach of the vaccine programme and allowing time to achieve the full benefits for all those currently being vaccinated. The Plan emphasises the importance of personal responsibility in minimising opportunities for virus transmission as we move into the final stages of the reopening of our society and economy.

In terms of arts and culture activities, one to one music, dance and art classes may operate at the moment.

Additionally, at its meeting on 31 August, Government agreed on the return of organised indoor group activities, on the following basis from 20 September:

- For organised indoor activities where attendees are fully vaccinated or recovered from COVID-19, and accompanying minors, 100 people may attend;

- For organised indoor activities where attendance is a mixed group of vaccinated and unvaccinated people, the group should be organised in pods of up to 6 participants (excluding adult leaders/teachers), with 2m distancing between pods.

Indoor group activities include sports, arts, culture and dance classes. All indoor group activities should ensure that there are appropriate infection prevention and control measures in place to minimise the risk of virus transmission. The Arts Council has prepared guidance on the reopening of arts, culture and dance activities for children and young people which is available on their website <http://www.artscouncil.ie/covid-19/government-guidelines/>, which is currently being updated.

As signalled by Government in its reopening plan, it is envisaged that a full return to these activities will be possible after 22 October 2021 as the vaccination programme progresses and subject to the levels of infections and hospitalisations at that time.

### **An Maolú i leith na Gaeilge san Aontas Eorpach**

270. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den Aire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán cur síos a dhéanamh ar cén comhordanú atá déanta ag a Roinn leis an Aontas Eorpach chun an tionscadal píolóta a ligeann d'aistritheoirí na Gaeilge a bheith lonnaithe san Aonad i gContae na Mí a leathnú, agus chun a chinntiú go dtiocfaidh méadú ar líon na n-aistritheoirí le Gaeilge in AE in áit díreach athlonnú ón mBriséil go dtí an Mhí a spreagadh. [41898/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** Cuirimse fáilte roimh chinneadh Choimisiún an Aontais Eorpaigh seirbhísí aistriúcháin Gaeilge ag leibhéal an AE a fhorbairt ar mhaithe le deireadh a chur leis an maolú ar úsáid na Gaeilge in institiúidí an AE ag deireadh na bliana seo. Tá oifigigh sinsireacha mo Roinne ag obair go dlúth lena gcomhghleacaithe sna hinstitiúidí le blianta beaga anuas chun úsáid na Gaeilge ag leibhéal an AE a mhéadú. Chuige sin, tá ionadaíocht ag mo Roinn ar Coiste Stiúrtha an tionscnaimh chun deireadh a chur leis an maolú. Níl aon ról ag mo Roinn, áfach, i gcinntí na n-institiúidí maidir leis na láthair ina mbeidh a gcuid baill foirne lonnaithe.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

271. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the measures she is taking to promote or facilitate remote working for staff in her Department or bodies under the aegis of her Department; the costs this has generated in terms of the provision of laptops, desktop computers or contributions to wi-fi costs or phone-related expenses; the number of staff who have applied for permission to work from home on a permanent or hybrid-model basis (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41961/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine**

**Martin):** Departments and Offices are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. To facilitate remote working, the Department provided laptops and mobile phones to staff where required and also carried out an home working health and safety assessment. The Department did not contribute to wifi costs.

An interim blended working policy is currently under development for staff of the Department to support a combination of office and remote working. A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised over the coming months.

Below, set out in tabular form, is a summary of costs. ICT costs refer to the provision of laptops and telephony costs refer to the provision of mobile phones.

Included also, are the costs gathered and submitted to my Department in respect of bodies under the aegis of my Department.

-	ICT Costs -	Telephony/Broadband Costs
Department	€281,926	€88,733*
Bodies under the Aegis		
Arts Council	€95,905	€58,491
Broadcasting Authority of Ireland	€16,434	€0
Chester Beatty Library	€7,725	€0
Crawford Art Gallery	€31,000	€2,500
Fáilte Ireland	€157,290	€25,800
Fis Éireann   Screen Ireland	€98,522	€0
Foras Teanga (Foras na Gaeilge)	€28,180	€0
Foras Teanga (Ulster-Scots Agency)	€240	€0
Irish Museum of Modern Art	€27,872	€10,709
National Concert Hall	€65,849	€0
National Gallery of Ireland	€153,552	€0
National Library of Ireland	€79,636	€0
National Museum of Ireland	€72,277	€53,199
Sport Ireland	€0	€0
Tourism Ireland	€147,295	€0
Údarás na Gaeltachta	€79,572	€0

\* includes ongoing mobile phone costs arising prior to Covid 19 as part of day-to-day business.

RTÉ and TG4 have advised that they will respond directly to the Deputy.

### Covid-19 Pandemic

272. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when indoor sports training is likely to recommence; and when guidelines will be issued. [41974/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):**The resumption of indoor sports training has been permitted on an individual basis since 7 June. In line with the recently published Government plan, COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting, there will be a further easing of restrictions on organised indoor and outdoor sporting activities generally from 20 September which will permit the resumption of indoor sports training on a group

basis in accordance with the conditions and limits specified in the Government’s plan. Further details and updated guidance will also be available from the various National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and Sport Ireland maintains a close liaison with the NGBs and provides guidance to them as required.

### State Bodies

273. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the breakdown of details of consultants retained by Fáilte Ireland including the name of the consultant, project work, cost of project and date of completion in each of the years 2019, 2020 and 2021, in tabular form. [42028/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The issue raised by the Deputy is an operational matter for Fáilte Ireland. Accordingly, I have referred the question to the agency for further information and direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

### Údarás na Gaeltachta

274. **Deputy Darren O’Rourke** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the breakdown of the refurbishment costs carried out by Údarás na Gaeltachta on its factory premises in the Baile Ghib Gaeltacht in County Meath over the past four years in tabular form (details supplied). [42130/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** A major refurbishment and redevelopment of a 4,127 square metre factory building owned by Údarás na Gaeltachta in Baile Ghib, Co. Meath commenced at the end of 2017, arising from an expression of interest and subsequent business plan submitted by an innovative new company, Novelplast, with a view to locating the business and creating new jobs in the Baile Ghib Gaeltacht.

Novelplast commenced operations in Baile Ghib in 2019 and has surpassed its business expectations to date. At the end of 2019, the company had 20 full time staff employed and has now grown to 39 staff, with plans for further expansion.

The company operates in the green economy and the business is based on sustainable and innovative recycling solutions for the industrial plastic industry. Novelplast recycles and repurposes industrial offcut filament and fibre material from polyethylene terephthalate (PET) manufacturing facilities in order to make PET pellets/chips.

Údarás na Gaeltachta committed funding for the upgrade of the building to bring it to the required industry specifications, along with substantial extra works specified by the client company, Novelplast. The total capital expenditure on the project to date is c. €2.8m. A substantial portion of this relates to the extra works specified by the company, in respect of which Údarás na Gaeltachta will be repaid in full by the company as is the norm with such expenditure. Details of expenditure made by An tÚdarás are provided in the table below.

Year	2017 / 2018	2019	2020	2021	Total to date
Expenditure	€321,623	€1,153,389	€1,017,430	€300,513	€2,792,955

I understand that Novelplast is working with industry partners and third level intuitions to transform the plastics industry through a project which was approved earlier this year for grant

aid under the Government's Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund. More recently, I understand that Noveplast was successful in being selected under the Government's first Circular Economy Innovation Grant Scheme (CEIGS) for a project that aims to develop the technology capable of sustainably recycling marine litter and discarded/used fishing nets.

*Question No. 275 answered with Question No. 269.*

### **Departmental Schemes**

276. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of the basic income guarantee pilot scheme for artists as per the report by the oversight group which she previously advised was due at the end of July 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42149/21]

280. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of her plans to introduce a pilot living wage for artists' scheme. [42338/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 276 and 280 together.

The Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce report Life Worth Living, was published in November 2020 and made ten recommendations for the sector. The recommendations included a proposal to pilot a basic income scheme for a three-year period in the arts, culture, audiovisual and live performance and events sectors. As part of the Economic Recovery Plan launched on June 1st, Government committed to a Basic Income pilot scheme for artists.

I established an Oversight Group with the remit of addressing the outstanding recommendations of the Life Worth Living report. The membership of the Group is drawn from Departments and Agencies which have the ability and wherewithal to make appropriate progress on the outstanding recommendations, including the Basic Income Guarantee pilot.

The Oversight Group held its first meeting on May 27th chaired by the Department and joined by representatives of the Departments of Finance, Social Protection, Public Expenditure and Reform as well as Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The Directors of the Arts Council and Screen Ireland are also members alongside a representative of the County and City Managers' Association.

I asked the Oversight Group to prioritise the manner in which a Basic Income pilot scheme for artists could be delivered. The Group has provided me with a preliminary report on the different options and I will be discussing these with my senior officials in the coming days. Once I've had an opportunity to review I will go back to the Oversight Group to ask them to finalise the report. I expect to be making a proposal for a Basic Income as part of the Budget 2022 discussions, after which further details should be available on how the pilot scheme will be progressed.

*Question No. 277 answered with Question No. 269.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

278. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if businesses can refuse access to indoor hospitality to customers using the

HSE vaccination card, with photo identification, as their primary proof of vaccination and not an EU digital COVID certificate; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42227/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** Regulation 5 of the Health Act 1947 (Sections 31AB and 31AD) (Covid-19) (Operation of certain indoor premises) Regulations 2021 (SI 385 of 2021), regarding proofs for the purposes of proof of immunity, provides that both the EU Digital Covid Certificate and the HSE Covid-19 Vaccination Record meet the requirements for acceptable proof of immunity.

*Question No. 279 answered with Question No. 269.*

*Question No. 280 answered with Question No. 276.*

### **Sports Funding**

281. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when he expects to announce the sport capital grant allocations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42420/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The Sports Capital and Equipment Programme (SCEP) is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and physical recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country. The 2020 round of the SCEP closed for applications on Monday 1st March 2021. By the closing date, over 3,100 applications were submitted seeking over €200m in funding. This is the highest number of applications ever received.

The scoring system and assessment procedures was published earlier this year and all applications are being assessed in accordance with these. Approximately one thousand of the submitted applications were for “equipment only” projects. These applications were assessed first and €16.6m worth of grants were announced on the 6th August.

The remaining applications for capital works are now being assessed. Given the large number of applications received, this work is likely to take a number of months to complete with allocations expected to be announced before the end of this year.

### **Sports Funding**

282. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when a works approval will issue for a project (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42569/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The club referred to by the Deputy was allocated a grant under the 2018 Sports Capital and Equipment Programme (SCEP) which remains fully outstanding. My Department emailed the club the details of the provisional allocation and set out the terms and conditions that must be met prior to formal approval of the grant.

Formal approval cannot be given until the club has provided all the required documentation. In this regard, I understand that the outstanding documentation was received earlier this week and formal approval issued on the same day.

## **Sports Funding**

283. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media further to Parliamentary Question No. 226 of 25 May 2021, the status of the grant; and the date on which the grant will issue to the club. [42601/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** As outlined in the previous response to the parliamentary question referred to, in accordance with the terms and conditions of the Sports Capital and Equipment Programme and due to the level of grants received by the club in the past, it is necessary to put in place a number of legal deeds in order to protect the public investment in the facility. Legal formalities in relation to this grant have not yet been finalised as the Chief State Solicitor's Office is still awaiting documentation from the grantee's solicitor. I understand this latest information was requested at the end of July. Once the CSSO receives the outstanding documentation and confirms receipt of same, there will be no undue delay with my Department advancing the grant.

## **Flexible Work Practices**

284. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the steps being taken to facilitate remote working within her Department in particular to encourage remote working for those who live in the regions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42715/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** Since the onset of the public health emergency, my Department's employees, in the main, have been working in a fully remote environment. My Department has offices in Dublin, Kerry, Galway and Donegal and has provided IT support to enable employees working remotely. All employees have also been advised and have access to a number of supports for health and safety ergonomic assessments, supports for psychological health and well-being and access to the Disability Liaison Officer.

The Government has committed, in the Programme for Government, to mandating public sector employees to move to 20% home and remote working. In line with this commitment, the Government is committed to developing models of flexible working for the Civil Service. In that context, it is proposed that remote working will be facilitated on a blended basis, subject to the suitability of roles to be carried out remotely. A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised over the coming months which focuses on the longer-term approach to remote working across the Civil Service.

The Department is committed to implementing a policy of blended working that will ensure continued delivery of quality public services to Government, the public and business. Officials are developing an Interim Blended Working Policy to facilitate transition arrangements and blended working, following the announcement of public health measures to commence a gradual and staggered return to the office from 20 September 2021.

My Department will continue to provide employees with ongoing up-to-date guidance and supports on blended working arrangements.

## **Flexible Work Practices**

285. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the way in which her Department and public bodies and agencies under her remit are accommodating requests for persons to work from home. [42765/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The Government has committed in the Programme for Government to mandating public sector employees to move to 20% home and remote working. A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised over the coming months which focuses on the longer-term approach to remote working. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies outlining principle which can be tailored to the specific requirements each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas and the wider public sector.

My Department is committed to implementing a policy of blended working that will meet the needs of the Department to ensure continued delivery of quality public services to Government, the public and business. It is proposed that remote working, post pandemic, will be facilitated on a blended basis, subject to the suitability of roles to be carried out remotely.

Officials in my Department are developing an Interim Blended Working Policy to facilitate transition arrangements to blended working in my Department, following the announcement of public health measures to commence a gradual and staggered return to the office from 20 September, 2021. My Department will continue to provide employees with ongoing up-to-date guidance and supports on blended working arrangements.

With regard to the Agencies under my Department's remit, as this is an operational matter for the respective Agencies, I have forwarded your question to each Agency to reply directly to you on the matter.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

286. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will meet with representatives of an organisation (details supplied) to facilitate the safe return of dance, drama, music and related performing arts class for children, young persons and adults. [42807/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I met with this organisation to which the Deputy refers on 30 August as part of a wider meeting with the live entertainment sector, which was also attended by An Taoiseach and An Tánaiste. In addition, my officials have had meetings with the organisations and engagement is ongoing.

### **Sports Funding**

287. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when decisions will be made on the 2021 applications under the capital sports grant scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42872/21]

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

2020 round of the SCEP closed for applications on Monday 1st March 2021. By the closing date, over 3,100 applications were submitted seeking over €200m in funding. This is the highest number of applications ever received.

The scoring system and assessment procedures was published earlier this year and all applications are being assessed in accordance with these. Approximately one thousand of the submitted applications were for “equipment only” projects. These applications were assessed first and €16.6m worth of grants were announced on the 6th August.

The remaining applications for capital works are now being assessed. Given the large number of applications received, this work is likely to take a number of months to complete with allocations expected to be announced before the end of this year. Once these allocations are finalised an announcement on the timing of the next round of the Programme will be made.

### **Sports Funding**

288. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when the sports capital grant will open for applications. [42884/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The Sports Capital and Equipment Programme (SCEP) is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and physical recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country. The 2020 round of the SCEP closed for applications on Monday 1st March 2021. By the closing date, over 3,100 applications were submitted seeking over €200m in funding. This is the highest number of applications ever received.

The scoring system and assessment procedures was published earlier this year and all applications are being assessed in accordance with these. Approximately one thousand of the submitted applications were for “equipment only” projects. These applications were assessed first and €16.6m worth of grants were announced on the 6th August.

The remaining applications for capital works are now being assessed. Given the large number of applications received, this work is likely to take a number of months to complete with allocations expected to be announced before the end of this year. Once these allocations are finalised an announcement on the timing of the next round of the Programme will be made.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

289. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the position regarding swimming lessons for autistic children; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42886/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** Since 7 June, indoor sports, swimming pools and leisure centres have been allowed to re-open for individual training purposes and for the provision of swimming classes.

The Deputy may also wish to note that, in line with the recently published Government plan, COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting, there will be a further easing of restrictions on organised indoor and outdoor sporting activities generally from 20 September. Further details are set out in the plan and will also be available from Swim

Ireland, the National Governing Body for swimming in Ireland.

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

290. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the measures being taken by her Department to ensure the long-term stability of the arts and entertainment sectors; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42891/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I am acutely aware of the devastating impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the arts/culture and live entertainment sectors. I have engaged with numerous stakeholders in the sector during the course of the pandemic to ensure that appropriate supports were put in place.

To support the industry through this difficult period I have to date allocated €61.5m for a suite of measures designed to sustain and support the sector, including:

- €25m Live Performance Support Scheme
- €14m Music and Entertainment Business Support Scheme
- €11.5m Event Sector Covid Support Scheme (funded via transfer from D/ETE Vote)
- €5m Local Authority Performance Support Scheme
- €5m Capital Support Scheme
- €1m Patrick's Day Festival

I committed during August to securing a reopening plan for the sector through a clear road-map for the sustainable reopening of activities in the live entertainment, culture and arts sectors.

At its meeting on 31 August, Government agreed on the return to outdoor and indoor events at the following capacity levels and with maximum available social distancing between groups:

- Indoors – for vaccinated/recovered people and accompanying minors- 60% capacity
- Outdoors - for vaccinated/recovered people and accompanying minors- 75% capacity
- Outdoors - for mixed groups of vaccinated/recovered and unvaccinated people – 50% capacity.

The announcement of dates for the lifting of restrictions is a response to a clear call from the sector. In the interim, we will see increased opportunities for live performance both indoors and outdoors from 6 September.

Government understands that the full return of live performance will not happen overnight. I am examining the supports in place for the sector to ensure that available resources are best deployed to meet the needs of the sector. My Department is working with the Department of Social Protection also on the impact of the changes to the Pandemic Unemployment Payment to ensure that those in the arts and entertainment sector continue to have adequate supports pending the full resumption of activity.

### **Sports Funding**

291. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when payment of outstanding grants can be made to a club (details supplied) at the earliest possible date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42898/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The club referred to by the Deputy was provisionally allocated a grant of €81,500 under the 2017 Sports Capital Programme (SCP) for the development of an artificial playing surface and a further €83,343 under the 2018 SCP towards the provision of floodlights and non-personal sports equipment. In accordance with the terms and conditions of the SCP and due to the level of grants received by the club in the past, it is necessary to put in place a number of legal deeds in order to protect the public investment in the facility. Legal formalities in relation to this grant have not yet been finalised as the Chief State Solicitor's Office (CSSO) is still awaiting the required documentation from the grantee's solicitor. It will not be possible to provide formal approval of the grants until the CSSO confirms that all legal formalities have been completed. Once the CSSO receives the outstanding documentation and confirms receipt of same, there will be no undue delay in paying the grants subject to the other necessary documentation being submitted by the club.

### **Sports Funding**

292. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when she expects the sports capital grant scheme awards to be announced; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42910/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The Sports Capital and Equipment Programme (SCEP) is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and physical recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country. The 2020 round of the SCEP closed for applications on Monday 1st March 2021. By the closing date, over 3,100 applications were submitted seeking over €200m in funding. This is the highest number of applications ever received.

The scoring system and assessment procedures was published earlier this year and all applications are being assessed in accordance with these. Approximately one thousand of the submitted applications were for "equipment only" projects. These applications were assessed first and €16.6m worth of grants were announced on the 6th August.

The remaining applications for capital works are now being assessed. Given the large number of applications received, this work is likely to take a number of months to complete with allocations expected to be announced before the end of this year.

### **Government Communications**

293. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if her ministerial phones have been hacked or attempted to be hacked during her term of office. [42934/21]

294. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she has ever used her personal phones for Government business; and if so, if the personal phones have been hacked during her term of office. [42952/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 293 and 294 together.

I can confirm that I do not use a personal phone for official business. Officials in my Department have confirmed that there is no evidence of my official phone being hacked or attempted to be hacked.

*Question No. 294 answered with Question No. 293.*

### Freedom of Information

295. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the number of freedom of information requests responded to by her Department in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; the number of responses that included documents related to text messages and other phone message communications such as messages sent through an application (details supplied) in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42974/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The information requested by the Deputy in respect of the number of Freedom of Information requests received by my Department for the years provided is set out in the table below.

All records are released to applicants, in accordance with the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 2014 and each includes an associated schedule and a decision letter. My Department does not retain statistics relating to different types of records i.e. email, text.

My Department publishes Freedom of Information disclosure logs online at the following link: - [www.gov.ie/en/publication/57a3b-foi-logs/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/57a3b-foi-logs/).

If the Deputy has any queries in relation to any particular request, the FOI Unit of my Department will be happy to assist him in this matter.

Year	Freedom of Information Requests
2016	169
2017	158
2018	239
2019	225
2020	156
2021 (YTD)	118

### Commissions of Investigation

296. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the cost of each commission of investigation under the remit of her Department over the preceding decade. [42999/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I am advised that no commission of investigation cases have been undertaken by my Department during the period specified by the Deputy.

## **Sports Funding**

297. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the date on which a new large-scale sport infrastructure fund will open for prospective applicants. [43006/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The National Sports Policy was published in 2018 and provided for the establishment of a Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund (LSSIF); the National Development Plan provided a capital allocation of at least €100m for the Fund over the period to 2027.

The first allocations under the LSSIF were announced in January 2020 and, thus far, approximately €86.4m has been awarded to 33 different proposals. The immediate priority is to advance all of these projects. As it is now approximately 19 months since the first allocations were made, and in view of the issues faced by grantees as a result of the Covid pandemic, it is timely to review progress on all current projects. As part of this review, my Department is also considering the timing of any new call for proposals and it is expected that the review will be completed in the coming months.

## **Sports Funding**

298. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of an appeal submitted by Kildare County Council in respect of a grant from the large-scale sport infrastructure fund for a swimming pool in Maynooth, County Kildare. [43007/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund (LSSIF) was launched in 2018 to provide Exchequer support for larger sports facility projects, including swimming pools, with at least €100m being made available over the period to 2027.

An application was received from Kildare County Council in respect of the project referred to by the Deputy. All applications under the LSSIF were assessed in accordance with the published scoring criteria. The scores were awarded based on factors such as the priority given to the project by the relevant NGB and/or local authority, the level of funding being provided by the project sponsor and how the project was likely to increase participation. The total funding applied for under the scheme significantly exceeded the amount available to allocate and the project referred to by the Deputy did not score sufficiently highly to be awarded a grant under this first set of allocations.

All unsuccessful applicants were given the opportunity to appeal the Department's decision if it was felt that an error was made in the assessment process. Six appeals were received including one in respect of the application referred to by the Deputy. The appeal was assessed by officials who were not involved in the initial assessment process. While no significant errors were discovered in the scoring to warrant a grant award in this case, my Department is currently undertaking a review of progress on all existing LSSIF grants. As part of this work my Department is examining, inter alia, progress on all projects awarded funding to date. The scope for awarding new grants to projects which missed out under the first set of allocations is also being considered as part of this review. As part of the review, my Department is also considering the timing of any new call for proposals and it is expected that the review will be completed in the coming months.

### **Ministerial Appointments**

299. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the number of formal and informal roles held by a person (details supplied) in the name of her Department or associated agency in the lifetime of this Government; when they were appointed to same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43044/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I am informed that no formal or informal roles were held by the person to whom the Deputy refers, in my Department or Agencies under my remit during the period in question.

### **Departmental Communications**

300. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she and or her special advisors and or officials use or have used services (details supplied) to communicate in the past 18 months. [43080/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The services to which the Deputy refers have been used on occasion by me and my advisors during the period outlined by the Deputy for general communication purposes.

### **Raidió Teilifís Éireann**

301. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the role she has in the provision of proper pension provision for RTÉ pensioners; when the last increase was received by RTÉ pensioners; the level of increase provided; if her attention has been drawn to the actuarial advice stating the RTÉ pension fund is in a strong enough position to provide for an increase and for all future pension and indexation requirements; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43186/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** As Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and Media, I have responsibility for the governance of RTÉ including the legislative and regulatory framework for broadcasting. Section 91 of the Broadcasting Act provides for the RTÉ pension Scheme. In addition, Section 85 of the RTÉ Superannuation Scheme provides that a pension granted, under the provisions of Regulations 48 and 49, may be increased from time to time and this is for determination by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. The RTÉ Superannuation Scheme, established under Statute, is sponsored by RTÉ. The Scheme is managed by a Board of Trustees who have responsibility for overseeing the scheme's operations, including the investment of the scheme's assets.

The last pension increase granted to pensioners of the RTÉ Superannuation Scheme was on 15th June 2008. The increase was 2.5%.

A proposal for a 2% pension increase was submitted in December 2020, to my Department seeking my approval and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, as required under the legislation that I have outlined.

I can advise that the matter is currently under review, taking into account all actuarial information, and in consultation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. A decision

will be made on the matter when the review and consultations have concluded.

### **Building Regulations**

302. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if there are plans to address anomalies in planning regulations (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42367/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** Under the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended (the Act), all development, unless specifically exempted under the Act or associated Regulations, requires planning permission.

In this regard, Class 31 of Schedule 2 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as amended, provides that certain classes of development carried out by a statutory undertaker authorised to provide a telecommunications service are, subject to specified conditions, exempted development from the requirement to obtain planning permission. Where the conditions and size thresholds specified in the exemption class are not complied with or are exceeded, planning permission is required.

Exemptions from the requirement to obtain planning permission in respect of specific forms of development are provided for when they are considered to be consistent with proper planning and sustainable development.

These arrangements are considered appropriate for the purpose of supporting the roll-out of a high quality communications service by a statutory undertaker while also taking account of the ongoing technological advances in this area. The legislative provisions are supplemented by planning guidelines entitled the Telecommunications Antennae and Support Structure Guidelines, which originally issued to planning authorities in 1996. In 2012, my Department issued Circular Letter PL07/12 to planning authorities, updating certain sections of these Guidelines. The Guidelines provide advice on appropriate location and siting considerations for telecommunication installations and masts to be considered in the development planning and development management process. The Guidelines, and subsequent Circular Letter, are available at the following links:

[www.opr.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/2012-Telecommunications-Antennae-and-Support-Structures-Circular-PL-07-12-1.pdf](http://www.opr.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/2012-Telecommunications-Antennae-and-Support-Structures-Circular-PL-07-12-1.pdf)

and

[assets.gov.ie/111242/904beafb-f8f4-4585-954f-c0753072e422.doc](http://assets.gov.ie/111242/904beafb-f8f4-4585-954f-c0753072e422.doc)

I have no current plans to amend the Regulations in this matter.

### **Water Quality**

303. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the surveys being carried out under the Water Framework Directive in the south-east; the expected timeframe for surveys to be complete; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43190/21]

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

The Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO) is a shared service for the local authority sector. Working with State agencies, LAWPRO assists with the development and implementation of river basin management plans, which sets out the actions Ireland will take in order to improve the quality of our aquatic environment and meet the objectives of the EU Water Framework Directive.

As part of Ireland's second River Basin Management Plan, 190 Priority Areas for Action (PAA) were identified around which LAWPRO's work is concentrated. These are catchment areas that have been prioritised for focussed scientific assessment to understand the issues affecting water quality. Working with local communities, landowners, business owners and public bodies, LAWPRO then seeks to develop relevant and workable solutions to identified issues. There are 44 PAA's in the South East region (Laois, Kilkenny, Carlow, Wexford, Waterford, Tipperary, some overlap into Wicklow, Offaly and Limerick).

The first step of LAWPRO's work in a PAA, is to improve the scientific understanding by gathering and collating all relevant and available data into a Desktop Study Report. This ensures there is a focus on the issues that are significantly affecting water quality and the mitigation actions that should be prioritised.

Another important aspect of LAWPRO's work in the PAA's is informing and working with local communities. Following their desktop studies and prior to commencing their fieldwork assessments, LAWPRO organises a community information meeting to discuss the water body with local people and interest groups. Local meetings are followed by farmer engagement events organised by advisors from the collaborative Agricultural Sustainability Support and Advisory Programme, with the support of LAWPRO staff. Work to this stage has been completed for 34 of the PAA's in the South East region.

Using this and other scientific information, LAWPRO catchment scientists then begin their fieldwork, walking the riverbanks and taking water samples to assess the condition of the river. Once the fieldwork is concluded and analysed, LAWPRO discuss the outcome of the assessment with the relevant implementing bodies or landowners, agreeing timelines for implementation of measures to improve water quality. The advisors from the Agricultural Sustainability Support and Advisory Programme will discuss any agricultural measures with the farmers.

Noting the impact of the COVID emergency on their work, particularly the community meetings and fieldwork elements, to date LAWPRO have completed 11 overall assessments, with fieldwork in 18 PAA's currently ongoing.

A summary of the PAA's in the South East Regions is outlined below, with further information available on LAWPRO's website at [awaters.ie/priority-areas-for-action/](http://awaters.ie/priority-areas-for-action/). Additional information on water quality and the status of waters can also be viewed on [www.catchments.ie](http://www.catchments.ie).

As key commitment in the Programme for Government, my Department is currently preparing a new strengthened River Basin Management Plan for Ireland, to cover the period 2022 – 2027. Further advancing Ireland's commitment to the implementation of the Water Framework Directive, the new plan will build on the work of the second-cycle, again describing the main pressures and activities affecting water status and setting out the environmental objectives to be achieved up to 2027. The plan will also identify the measures needed to achieve these objectives, including a proposed expansion of the Areas for Action.

A draft plan is due to be published shortly for a 6 month public consultation, so I would urge everyone to please engage in this process once the consultation is launched.

**PAA Progress Summary for the South East Region:**

Area for action	County	Catchment	Progress status
Aherlow	Tipperary/Limerick	Suir	Fieldwork underway
Ara	Tipperary	Suir	Fieldwork underway
Athy Stream	Kildare/Laois	Barrow	Fieldwork completed
Ballyfinboy (Upper)	Offaly/Tipperary	Lower Shannon	Not commenced yet
Ballyroan	Laois	Nore	Not commenced yet
Bannow	Wexford	Ballyteighe-Bannow	Fieldwork underway
Blackwater (Wexford)	Wexford	Owenavorrigh	Not commenced yet
Borrisoleigh	Tipperary	Lower Shannon	Not commenced yet
Bregagh (Kilkenny)	Kilkenny	Nore	Initial Public Engagement completed
Brownstown (Pococke)	Kilkenny	Nore	Not commenced yet
Bunow	Tipperary	Lower Shannon	Initial Public Engagement completed
Burren	Carlow	Barrow	Fieldwork underway
Clashawley	Tipperary	Suir	LCA report completed
Clodiagh (Portlaw)	Waterford	Suir	Fieldwork completed
Colligan-Brickey	Waterford	Colligan-Mahon	Fieldwork underway
Dead & Cauteen	Limerick/Tipperary	Lower Shannon	Fieldwork completed
Derreen & Douglas (Kiltegan)	Carlow/Wicklow	Slaney & Wexford Harbour	Fieldwork underway
Derry-Coolboy-Rosnastraw	Wicklow	Slaney & Wexford Harbour	Initial Public Engagement completed
Dinin (south, main and muck-alee)	Carlow/Kilkenny/Laois	Nore	Fieldwork completed
Duiske & Powerstown Stream	Kilkenny	Barrow	Fieldwork completed
Dunhill	Waterford	Colligan-Mahon	Fieldwork underway
Erkina	Laois	Nore	Fieldwork underway
Glenaboy	Waterford	Blackwater Munster	Fieldwork underway
Graney-Lerr	Kildare/Carlow	Barrow	Initial Public Engagement completed
Inch (Bilboa)	Tipperary	Lower Shannon	Fieldwork underway
Johns	Waterford	Suir	Fieldwork underway
Licky	Waterford	Blackwater Munster	Not commenced yet
Little Brosna	Tipperary/Offaly	Lower Shannon	Not commenced yet
Lingaun	Tipperary/Kilkenny	Suir	Initial Public Engagement completed
Lorrha Stream	Tipperary	Lower Shannon	Fieldwork underway
Lower Nenagh & Clareen	Tipperary	Lower Shannon	Fieldwork underway
Mountain	Carlow	Barrow	Fieldwork completed
Nuenna	Kilkenny/Laois	Nore	Fieldwork completed
Owenavorrigh	Wexford	Owenavorrigh	Initial Public Engagement completed
Owveg (Nore)	Laois	Nore	Fieldwork completed
Portarlington	Laois	Barrow	Initial Public Engagement completed
Slaney	Carlow/Wicklow	Slaney & Wexford Harbour	Fieldwork underway
Sow	Wexford	Slaney & Wexford Harbour	Fieldwork underway
Tay	Waterford	Colligan-Mahon	Fieldwork completed
Toem & Cappawhite	Limerick/Tipperary	Lower Shannon	Fieldwork underway
Urrin	Wexford	Slaney	Fieldwork completed
Waterford Harbour	Wexford	Ballyteighe-Bannow	Fieldwork underway
Wexford Coastal Lagoons	Wexford	Ballyteighe-Bannow	Fieldwork underway
Wexford Harbour	Wexford	Slaney & Wexford Harbour	Not commenced yet

## Housing Policy

304. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if consideration will be given to a review of the income housing thresholds for housing waiting lists within local authorities, specifically in terms of greater degree of disregard specifically in circumstances in which there are children with severe disabilities in the household. [41441/21]

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

The 2011 Regulations prescribe maximum net income limits for each local authority, in different bands according to the area concerned, with income being defined and assessed according to a standard Household Means Policy. The 2011 Regulations do not provide local authorities with any discretion to exceed the limits that apply to their administrative areas.

Under the Household Means Policy, which applies in all local authorities, net income for social housing assessment is defined as gross household income less income tax, PRSI, Universal Social Charge and 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/](http://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.

Finally, the National Housing Strategy for People with a Disability 2011-2016 was extended to the end of 2021 and a review of the priority actions outlined within the strategy is being un-

dertaken this year. A period of research and consultation is taking place to inform the development of a new Housing Strategy. The second round of consultation on the new Strategy is due to get underway in the Autumn and the new Strategy will be published by the end of the year.

### **Housing Policy**

305. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage further to Parliamentary Question No. 600 of 15 June 2021, when the internal working group established to consider a long-term strategy for unsold affordable housing units last met; the current members of the internal working group; when he expects the working group to meet again; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41468/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** As of Q4 2020, a total of 2,039 unsold affordable units have been identified across 19 local authorities.

These units are available for social housing and currently occupied by social housing tenants. These properties have provided homes for these tenants dating from 2009 when my Department issued guidance to local authorities on the use of unsold affordable properties as a means to meet social housing need.

In September 2020, I convened a working group to examine the issues around these units in detail. This working group comprises members of the Local Government Management Agency, Housing Finance Agency, Housing Agency, Approved Housing Bodies through the Irish Council of Social Housing and my Department.

The group last met in November 2020. The next meeting is planned for September 2021.

### **Departmental Funding**

306. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will provide more funding to local authorities to maintain beaches and coastal communities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41469/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The maintenance of beaches and coastal communities is achieved by a range of programmes provided by local authorities, as well as across Government. As the Minister responsible for marine environmental policy maintaining our beaches and coast is a key priority for me.

In addition to providing core local government funding, my Department funds and supports the "Clean Coasts" range of programmes and the "Blue Flag Awards" operated by An Taisce in which local authorities and communities are engaged in managing and protecting local beaches and the coastal environment.

Clean Coasts currently has 1,540 groups with approximately 30,000 volunteers including individuals, local communities, schools, residents associations, sports clubs, universities, youth groups, tourist attractions, and businesses.

My Department continues to keep these programmes under review.

### **Departmental Data**

307. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of homeless persons who have died in the State in each of the past five years and to date in 2021. [41509/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** There have been a number of deaths of people who had been sleeping rough or accessing homeless services over the last number of years. Each of these deaths is a tragedy and I extend my sympathies to the families concerned. The deaths of people availing of homeless services are a concern and are being taken very seriously. It is important that we establish the facts concerning the circumstances involved, and that we base our response on the best knowledge and evidence available.

While the information requested in respect of the number of deaths of homeless service users is not compiled in my Department, a feasibility study on data collection of homeless deaths nationally is being undertaken by the Health Research Board on behalf of the Department of Health. This is due to be completed by the end of 2021. The research is applying the methodology used to compile the National Drug Related Deaths Index, which is a census of drug-related deaths and deaths among drug users and those who are alcohol dependent in Ireland. The data collection for 2019 deaths, including deaths among people who were homeless, is reviewing approximately 17,000 files from all Coroner districts.

A review of homeless deaths was undertaken on behalf of the Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE) by Dr. Austin O'Carroll, the HSE appointed Clinical Lead for Covid-19 and Homelessness in Dublin. The review analysed the available data concerning deaths in homeless services for 2020 to identify learning for homeless and health services that could help tailor the provision of care to homeless people. This 'Interim Report on Mortality in Single Homeless Population 2020' was completed in June 2021. Owing to certain data limitations, including Covid-19 restrictions limiting access to coroner's reports, the report will be subject to revision when further data becomes available. I have met with Dr. O'Carroll to discuss his Report and its recommendations.

It is vital that we continue to deliver the appropriate measures to ensure that all individuals experiencing homelessness are supported to exit into permanent housing solutions and that those with complex health and mental health needs are provided with the supports they need. My Department is working closely with the Department of Health, the HSE and local authorities in respect of these issues.

'Housing for All - a New Housing Plan for Ireland' is the Government's strategic housing plan to 2030. It includes measures targeted specifically at those experiencing homelessness with complex needs. It commits to the continued expansion of Housing First, and, importantly, ensuring that health and mental health supports are provided. An individual health care plan will be provided for all homeless individuals that need one.

In particular, engaging with rough sleepers is vital. This engagement is first and foremost to encourage those rough sleeping to avail of shelter. But critically, it also allows their health needs to be assessed and provided for.

### **Housing Policy**

308. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the scope of the purchasing activity he envisages under section 8 of the Affordable Housing Act 2021; and the provisions it is planned to put into regulations under that section. [41514/21]

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

The Affordable Housing Act 2021 was signed into law by the President on 21 July 2021. On 18 August, I signed the Affordable Housing Act 2021 (Commencement) (Parts 1 and 3) Order 2021, which commenced Parts 1 and 3 of the Act from 19 August. This brought into operation the Cost Rental element of the Act. The text of the Order is available at: [www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2021/si/424/made/en/print](http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2021/si/424/made/en/print).

On 19 August 2021 I made the Affordable Housing Act 2021 (Cost Rental Designation) Regulations 2021, which came into effect that day. These Regulations govern the process by which the owners of dwellings may obtain the designation of their properties as Cost Rental dwellings. The text of the Regulations is available online at: [www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2021/si/425/made/en/print](http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2021/si/425/made/en/print).

On 2 September 2021 I signed the Affordable Housing Act 2021 (Commencement of Certain Provisions) Order 2021, which commenced Part 2 (other than subsections (2)(c), (6), and (7) of section 6) and Parts 4, 6, 7, and 8 of the Act from 3 September. The text of the Order is available at: [www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2021/si/450/made/en/print](http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2021/si/450/made/en/print).

With the relevant elements of the Act now commenced, it is my intention to make further Regulations governing Local Authority Affordable Purchase and Cost Rental housing.

### **Departmental Staff**

309. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the current policy regarding the employment of persons with disabilities in his Department and in each State and semi-State body under the aegis of his Department; the disability quota of his Department at present; if there is an active campaign to increase the disability workforce from the current target of 3% to a minimum of 6% by 2024; if this quota has now been exceeded; if so, the details of same; if there has been an advertised competition in relation to the quota; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41597/21]

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

My Department complies with all central policy and guidance, in relation to equality of opportunity in all of our employment practices. The vast majority of external recruitment for my Department is carried out by the Public Appointments Service and any additional recruitment undertaken by my Department is done in compliance with the terms of the recruitment licence issued to us by the Commission for Public Service Appointments.

Under the Disability Act 2005, public service bodies have a duty to promote and support the employment of people with disabilities and to ensure that at least 3% of their employees are people with disabilities. In addition, the Department has a statutory requirement to maintain accurate records on the number of staff with disabilities. To meet this requirement, on an annual basis, staff are requested to declare, confidentially, if they have a disability. In 2020 the percentage of staff working in my Department with a declared disability was 6%.

Some specific measures to support the employment of people with disabilities within my Department include:

Participation in the Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) programme since 2018 offering graduates with disabilities a 6 month work placement within the Department. This programme is a collaboration between the Irish Civil Service and AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability).

Support for the Job Shadow Day initiative on an annual basis, as part of the national project which brings people with disabilities and local employers together for one day; for the last number of years my Department has teamed with the Walkinstown Association for People with an Intellectual Disability (WALK). Due to Covid-19 we were not asked to participate in 2020.

In 2020 my Department introduced its Universal Design and Accessibility Policy and Action Plan, which aims to demonstrate the Department's commitment to accessibility, the principles of Universal Design and reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities.

During 2020 and 2021, my Department ran Disability Awareness Training and Autism Awareness Training, supporting our commitments under the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021.

My Department has a Disability Liaison Officer who provides additional support to staff with disabilities on an ongoing basis, providing reasonable accommodations as appropriate. We also have a mentoring programme open to all staff.

The details requested in relation to bodies under the aegis of my Department are a matter for the individual bodies concerned. Arrangements have been put in place by each Agency to facilitate the provision of information by State Bodies directly to members of the Oireachtas. The contact email addresses for each agency are set out in the table below.

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

## Housing Policy

310. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will introduce incentives to encourage housing downsizing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41679/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Government is committed to supporting older people to live in their own homes and com-

munities with dignity and independence for as long as possible, as this leads to the best outcomes both for the individual and for society as a whole.

The housing needs of older people are addressed specifically in seven Actions in the Government's new housing plan for the delivery of social, affordable, cost rental and private homes, Housing for All, which was launched last week. These Actions underpin the development of 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 and implementation of its 40 Actions will be supported by the provisions of Housing for All. A number of these are concerned with rightsizing and work is ongoing in relation to these.

The final report of the Implementation Group on the Housing Options for Our Ageing Population Policy Statement will be published by the end of 2021.

### Traveller Accommodation

311. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the total amount of funding for Traveller specific accommodation that was drawn down by each local authority since 2014; the amount drawn down to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41806/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** In accordance with the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998, the role of my Department is to ensure that there are adequate structures and supports in place to assist housing authorities in providing accommodation for Travellers, including a national framework of policy, legislation and funding.

The funding drawn down by local authorities for each of the years 2014 – 2020 and up to the 31 July 2021 are set out in the table below:

County Council	Drawdown 2014	Drawdown 2015	Drawdown 2016	Drawdown 2017	Drawdown 2018	Drawdown 2019	Drawdown 2020	Drawdown 31 July 2021
Carlow	€0	€0	€0	€71,450	€0	€381,898	€206,986	€38,587
Cavan	€0	€0	€9,398	€13,729	€0	€94,500	€13,114	€36,400
Clare	€250,613	€0	€0	€42,444	€13,250	€669,389	€174,032	€13,879
Cork City	€206,913	€427,304	€301,796	€97,000	€180,250	€42,319	€1,504,850	€206,941
Cork County	€15,322	€0	€0	€93,156	€0	€184,745	€133,684	€0
Donegal	€3,175	€4,750	€74,532	€15,100	€52,775	€0	€245,498	€48,717
Dublin City	€481,693	€99,162	€762,342	€734,209	€744,400	€895,197	€2,066,977	€239,066
Dun Laoghaire / Rathdown	€23,986	€1,592,429	€129,552	€1,857,313	€1,099,940	€32,834	€747,750	€0
Fingal	€424,754	€1,113,425	€0	€17,420	€886,957	€848,957	€486,858	€63,008
Galway City	€72,241	€62,150	€0	€95,102	€0	€0	€861,334	€414,645
Galway County	€0	€0	€123,816	€0	€267,032	€670,440	€1,107,714	€72,091
Kerry	€144,415	€3,810	€255,730	€28,566	€62,538	€75,131	€15,773	€78,332
Kildare	€0	€0	€0	€0	€29,510	€360,231	€261,110	€77,695

Kilkenny	€287,239	€397,577	€431,714	€563,040	€60,067	€408,856	€125,638	€99,889
Laois	€60,262	€30,600	€0	€0	€0	€0	€192,520	€103,317
Leitrim	€0	€65,975	€12,794	€59,933	€54,306	€0	€375,635	€33,537
Limerick City	€249,987	€68,923	€21,209	€219,918	€470,997	€1,424,782	€2,370,922	€2,025,200
Longford	€25,000	€88,966	€0	€0	€0	€0		€278,460
Louth	€0	€7,620	€444,484	€220,048	€3,810	€341,863	€287,087	€34,074
Mayo	€3,810	€0	€0	€0	€0	€0	€215,951	€252,038
Meath	€0	€0	€76,877	€5,750	€0	€91,790	€58,845	€57,202
Monaghan	€0	€0	€0	€0	€54,745	€0	€423,201	€43,991
Offaly	€73,760	€85,000	€37,775	€101,616	€10,999	€692,329	€499,833	€270,775
Roscommon	€96,126	€0	€10,808	€123,191	€102,274	€73,843	€148,168	€65,151
Sligo	€0	€0	€0	€9,931	€282,883	€1,131,397	€1,193,489	€80,997
South Dublin	€46,978	€0	€26,397	€0	€1,284,101	€106,719	€284,390	€181,528
Tipperary	€291,874	€23,142	€1,399,370	€399,337	€42,003	€0	€156,731	€191,202
Waterford								€173,817
Waterford City	€9,769	€0	€13,545	€22,610	€472,726	€77,562	€14,549	€30,666
Westmeath	€0	€0	€48,000	€0	€0	€0	€114,326	€19,897
Wexford	€328,733	€30,906	€87,695	€0	€0	€52,870	€30,382	€44,858
Wicklow	€67,038	€27,891	€0	€43,773	€88,783	€0	€180,305	€203,009
TOTAL	€3,163,688	€4,129,630	€4,267,834	€4,834,636	€6,264,345	€8,657,652	€14,497,654	€5,478,969

### Departmental Data

312. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the total number of persons presenting as homeless in County Mayo each year since 2011; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41807/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department publishes a detailed monthly report on homelessness, based on data provided by housing authorities. The Report outlines details of individuals utilising State-funded emergency accommodation arrangements that are overseen by housing authorities. The Reports are available on my Department's website at the following link: [www.gov.ie/en/collection/80ea8-homelessness-data/](http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/80ea8-homelessness-data/)

The most recently published data is in respect of July 2021. There were 34 adults in emergency accommodation in Mayo during the July count week. County Mayo is part of the West region for the purposes of homeless reporting, along with counties Galway and Roscommon. The combined West region reported 66 families, with 165 dependants associated with these families, in emergency accommodation in July 2021.

Reporting on homelessness began in its current format with the introduction of the Pathway Accommodation & Support System (PASS) in 2014.

All homeless data from January 2019 to date are also published on the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform's open data portal at: [data.gov.ie/](http://data.gov.ie/).

### Departmental Data

313. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the total number of persons from the Travelling community presenting as homeless

each year since 2011; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41808/21]

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

My Department currently publishes data on a monthly basis on the number of homeless persons accommodated in emergency accommodation funded and overseen by housing authorities. These reports are based on data provided by housing authorities, produced through the Pathway Accommodation & Support System (PASS). The reports are collated on a regional basis, are published on my Department's website and can be accessed using the following link: [www.gov.ie/en/collection/80ea8-homelessness-data/](http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/80ea8-homelessness-data/).

The reports do not provide information on the ethnicity of households accessing emergency accommodation and as such the information requested by the Deputy is not available in my Department.

### **Housing Schemes**

314. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans on reforming the existing tenant purchase scheme for local authorities as the conditions of the current scheme excludes large cohorts of council tenants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41847/21]

**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.

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.

### **Heritage Sites**

315. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address a matter (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41852/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage**

**(Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** The Unit referred to was originally an information point for the Park. The National Park is now served by a world-class visitor centre at Killarney House, which forms a gateway experience to Killarney National Park. It seeks to educate and encourage exploration and participation, creating a link between the tangible and intangible heritage of the Park.

As previously signalled, if the use of the premises was to be altered in the future, it would need to go through a planning application for change of use. This application could take some period of time, and would also produce a financial commitment. At present, casual trading is

not allowed within Killarney National Park. Notwithstanding the above, if it were to proceed to leasing for business, the entire process and award of such a venture would be subject to a tendering process, which would be an open competition.

While consideration could be given in the future to re-purposing the Unit, subject to a change of use application being made under the Planning and Development Acts, it would however require capital funding being re-directed from elsewhere in the Park. Moreover, there exists already significant parking issues at this location and a commercial operation at this site would only exacerbate this problem. Accordingly, the development of this unit is not a priority at present.

### **Renewable Energy Generation**

316. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will provide information on his Department's review of siting and size conditions for rooftop solar panels on homes and review of exemptions for educational and community buildings as part of the current development of interim planning regulations; if he will provide information on the stated need to consider environmental assessment reporting before finalisation; when the interim planning regulations will be submitted to the Houses of the Oireachtas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41863/21]

318. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to alter planning regulations to reduce the barriers associated with solar panel installation and to allow the installation of solar panels on public buildings, including schools without planning permission; the timeline for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41874/21]

319. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if information will be provided on his Department's review of the siting and size conditions for rooftop solar panels on homes and on the review of exemptions for educational and community buildings as part of the current development of interim planning regulations; if further information will be provided on the stated need to consider environmental assessment reporting before finalisation; when the interim planning regulations will be submitted to the Houses of the Oireachtas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41875/21]

327. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will provide information on his Department's review of siting and size conditions for rooftop solar panels on homes and review of exemptions for educational and community buildings, as part of the current development of interim planning regulations; if he will provide information on the stated need to consider environmental assessment reporting before finalisation; when the interim planning regulations will be submitted to the Houses of the Oireachtas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41996/21]

331. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will report on his Department's review of the siting and size regulations for rooftop solar panels on homes and businesses and the review of exemptions for educational and community buildings as part of the development of interim planning regulations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42043/21]

332. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will clarify the stated position regarding the need for environmental assessment reporting before the finalisation of interim planning regulations; and if he will make a statement on the

matter. [42044/21]

333. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when the interim planning regulations for the installation of solar panels will be submitted to the Houses of the Oireachtas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42045/21]

334. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if information will be provided on his Department's review of siting and size conditions for rooftop solar panels on homes and the review of exemptions for educational and community buildings as part of the current development of interim planning regulations; if further information will be provided on the stated need to consider environmental assessment reporting before finalisation; when the interim planning regulations will be submitted to the Houses of the Oireachtas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42070/21]

339. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of his Department's review of the siting and size conditions for rooftop solar panels on homes and the exemptions for educational and community buildings as part of the current development of interim planning regulations; if further information will be provided on the stated need to consider environmental assessment reporting before finalisation; when the interim planning regulations will be submitted to the Houses of the Oireachtas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42194/21]

344. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if information will be provided on his Department's review of siting and size conditions for rooftop solar panels on homes and the review of exemptions for educational and community buildings as part of the current development of interim planning regulations; if further information will be provided on the stated need to consider environmental assessment reporting before finalisation; when the interim planning regulations will be submitted to the Houses of the Oireachtas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42249/21]

351. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will provide information on his Department's review of siting and size conditions for rooftop solar panels on homes and a review of exemptions for educational and community buildings as part of the current development of interim planning regulations; if he will provide information on the stated need to consider environmental assessment reporting before finalisation; when the interim planning regulations will be submitted to the Houses of the Oireachtas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42355/21]

383. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of a review of siting and size conditions for rooftop solar panels on homes and a review of exemptions for educational and community buildings as part of the current development of interim planning regulations; if he will provide information on the need to consider environmental assessment reporting before finalisation; when the interim planning regulations will be submitted to the Houses of the Oireachtas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42895/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 316, 318, 319, 327, 331 to 334, inclusive, 339, 344, 351 and 383 together.

Under the Planning and Development Act, 2000, as amended (the Act), all development, unless specifically exempted under the Act or associated Regulations, requires planning permission. Section 4 of the Act and Schedule 2 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as amended (the Regulations), set out various exemptions from the requirement to obtain plan-

ning permission. Any such exemptions are subject to compliance with any general restrictions on exemptions set out in the Act or the Regulations and to the specific conditions set out in each class of exempted development in Schedule 2 of the Regulations. Included in the planning exemptions set out in the Regulations are those applying to the installation of solar infrastructure on a variety of building types, including houses, businesses, industrial and agricultural to which specific conditions are attached.

My Department, in the context of the Climate Action Plan and in consultation with the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications, has undertaken a review of the solar panel planning exemptions set out in the Regulations, with a particular focus on facilitating increased self-generation of electricity.

This review is now complete. Substantial changes to the current planning exemption thresholds for solar panels are proposed, as well as the introduction of new classes of solar panel planning exemptions relating to their use in apartments and in educational/community/religious buildings.

In light of the need to appropriately address aviation safety concerns arising from the “glint and glare” impacts of solar panels and the easing of the solar panel planning exemption thresholds, my Department is in the process of commissioning the development of detailed aviation safeguarding maps which will identify and delineate specific but limited areas in the vicinity of airports and aerodromes (referred to as exclusion zones) within which the exemptions will not apply. This mapping process will take approximately nine months to complete.

Whilst this work is ongoing, my Department proposes to advance interim regulations, adopting a temporary, albeit more stringent, radial approach incorporating initial defined exclusion zones around airports and aerodromes. These interim regulations, allowing for increased solar panel planning exemptions, will cover the vast majority of the land area of the country, only excluding those limited exclusion zones around airports and aerodromes.

The draft interim regulations have been reviewed under the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Directive 2001/42/EC and it has been determined that they are likely to have significant effects on the environment, necessitating the undertaking of a full SEA on the draft proposals. The SEA process, involving a public consultation on the proposals, is currently underway and is expected to be completed by mid-December 2021.

Following the public consultation and consideration of any submissions received, and as required under planning legislation, the proposed exempted development regulations must be laid in draft form before the Houses of the Oireachtas and receive a positive resolution from both Houses before they can be made and the SEA process concluded.

Accordingly, the process for finalising the interim solar panel planning exemptions as referred to above, with interim exclusion zones around airports and aerodromes, is now expected to be completed in early 2022. As outlined, pending the finalisation of the aforementioned aviation safeguarding maps, these interim regulations will allow for the vast majority of the country to be covered by the proposed new solar panel exemptions apart from those areas in close proximity to airports and aerodromes.

Work on the development of the aviation safeguarding maps for airports and aerodromes is expected to be completed in early 2022. The final supplementary set of regulations - delineating the final exclusion areas around airports and aerodromes in which the exemptions will not apply - will be prepared thereafter and, subject to environmental reporting considerations, will subsequently be laid in draft form before the Houses of the Oireachtas for approval in a timely manner.

## **Planning Issues**

317. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if plans are in place to extend planning permission due to delays arising from Covid-19 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41871/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** Section 42 of Planning and Development Act 2000 ('the Act') currently enables the holder of a planning permission to apply to a planning authority for an extension to the period of permission by an additional period not exceeding 5 years.

At present, if an extension to planning permission has been previously granted, the holder of a planning permission may be granted a further extension of duration under section 42(1A) of the Act in respect of a development that relates to 20 or more houses, where substantial works have been carried out, subject to the development being completed within 5 years of the originally extended permission or by 31 December 2021 (as extended in 2020 by Government Orders under Section 251A of the Act), whichever first occurs.

Section 7 of the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2021 ('the 2021 Act'), which was commenced on 9 September 2021, provides a temporary provision allowing for applications for further extensions of planning permissions which have already availed of an extension under section 42 of the Act, or otherwise under section 42(1A), and in circumstances where no further extension is permissible.

Where an application is made to a planning authority for a further extension, pursuant to the 2021 Act amendments, setting out the reasons why a development cannot be reasonably completed within the appropriate period as already extended, the planning authority shall further extend that period by an additional period of up to 2 years or until 31 December 2023, whichever first occurs, subject to the planning authority being satisfied of a number of matters, including that the development has commenced, substantial works have been carried out and that the extension is required to enable the development to be completed. This is subject also to the planning authority being satisfied that environmental impact assessment or appropriate assessment would not be required for the proposed extension of the appropriate period.

*Question No. 318 answered with Question No. 316.*

*Question No. 319 answered with Question No. 316.*

## **Waterways Ireland**

320. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will clarify whether businesses operating under a licence issued by Waterways Ireland are eligible for a commercial rates waiver in the context of Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will further clarify whether Waterways Ireland are exempt from Directive S.I. No. 308 of 2018 (details supplied). [41886/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** Local authorities are under a statutory obligation to levy rates on any property used for commercial purposes in accordance with the details entered in the valuation lists prepared by the Commissioner of Valuation under the Valuation Acts 2001 to 2015. The Commissioner of Valuation has responsibility for valuation matters, including determination of

relevant property under the Acts for the purposes of rates.

The Valuation Act 2001, as amended by the Valuation (Amendment) Act 2015, provides that all buildings used or developed for any purpose, including constructions affixed thereto, are rateable unless expressly exempted under Schedule 4 of the Act.

In order to continue supporting ratepayers, and in recognition of the ongoing impacts of COVID 19 and the associated public health restrictions, the Government has put in place a commercial rates waiver for the first nine months of 2021. It applies to businesses most seriously affected by the restrictions. Automatic eligibility is extended to hospitality including hotels, pubs and restaurants, leisure and entertainment, personal services such as hairdressers and barbers, and various other sectors. Categories of commercial property, such as offices, industrial premises and banks are not automatically eligible, but may qualify if they can provide proof of serious impact to their local authority.

If a business occupies a rateable property, on which commercial rates are levied by a local authority, that business may be eligible for the COVID 19 commercial rates waiver, depending on the valuation category of the property. If a business does not occupy a rateable property it is not eligible for the waiver.

Commercial traders carrying on business on the inland navigable waterways system managed by Waterways Ireland do so on foot of commercial licenses issued by Waterways Ireland under a number of different legislative instruments as follows:

- The Canals Act, 1986 (No. 3 of 1986)
- Canals Act, 1986 (Bye-Laws), 1988 (S.I. No. 247/1988)
- Shannon Navigation Act, 1990 (No. 20 of 1990)
- Shannon Navigation Bye-Laws, 1992 ( S.I. No. 80/1992)

The European Union (Casual Trading Act 1995) Regulations, S.I. No. 308 of 2018, do not apply to Waterways Ireland, as it is not a local authority and does not issue casual trading licenses under the Casual Trading Act, 1995 (the primary legislation from which the Statutory Instrument referred to in the Question derives).

## **Housing Policy**

321. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to review legislation on adverse possession or squatting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41923/21]

322. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the current legislation on adverse possession or squatting states; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41924/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 321 and 322 together.

The Property Registration Authority (PRA) processes adverse possession applications based on Section 49 of the Registration of Title Act 1964 and in accordance with the Land Registration Rules 2012. Ancillary statutes informing the process are the Local Registration of Title Act 1891, Statute of Limitations 1957, Registration of Title Act 1964, Succession Act 1965,

Registration of Deeds and Title Act 2006, and Land and Conveyancing Law Reform Act 2009.

Further information on the PRA's practices and procedures in relation to the processing of adverse possession applications is available in its Practice Direction, Adverse Possession – Title by Adverse Possession to Registered Land, which is available at [www.prai.ie/adverse-possession-title-by-adverse-possession-to-registered-land/](http://www.prai.ie/adverse-possession-title-by-adverse-possession-to-registered-land/)

I have no cause or plans to review the legislation in the area of adverse possession.

*Question No. 322 answered with Question No. 321.*

### **Hare Coursing**

323. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will provide all of the findings returned following the research carried out by the National Parks and Wildlife Service into the survival and behaviour of hares released back into the wild after they have been used for coursing; the survival and movement patterns of hares that have been returned to the wild after coursing; and the results in relation to releasing hares in the territory in which they were captured when compared to random locations. [41938/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Irish hare [*Lepus timidus hibernicus*] is protected under the Wildlife Acts [1976 and 2000] and is also listed on Annex V of the E.U. Habitats Directive [92/43/EEC]. The species is considered to be in favourable conservation status.

Hare coursing in Ireland is administered by the Irish Coursing Club (ICC) which is a body set up under the Greyhound Industry Act, 1958. Statutory responsibility for the Act resides with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Licences are required by the ICC under the terms of the Wildlife Acts to facilitate the capture of hares and the tagging of hares for closed park meetings. Hares are netted in advance of coursing meetings and then kept in dedicated hare parks for a period of several weeks. After coursing they are released again in to the wild.

The study commissioned by the NPWS of my Department in 2020 to research the movement and survivorship of hares after coursing was delayed due to Covid-19. Research will commence in the coming months and results will be published on completion, towards the end of 2022.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

324. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the measures he is taking to promote or facilitate remote working for staff in his Department or bodies under the aegis of his Department; the costs this has generated in terms of the provision of laptops, desktop computers or contributions to Wi-Fi costs or phone-related expenses; the number of staff who have applied for permission to work from home on a permanent or hybrid-model basis (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41956/21]

373. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the steps being taken to facilitate remote working within his Department in particular to encourage remote working for those who live in the regions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42710/21]

375. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the way in which his Department and public bodies and agencies under his remit are ac-

commodating requests for persons to work from home. [42760/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 324, 373 and 375 together.

Departments and Offices are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. Arrangements will be put in place in the coming weeks to allow for a gradual, staggered and physically distant return to the workplace for staff, as provided for in recently updated Government guidance. In respect of the longer-term, a central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

My Department, in line with its ICT strategy, has adopted the Build to Share (BTS) Managed Desktop shared service provided by OGCIO – Office of the Government’s Chief Information Officer. End of life devices were replaced between 2019 and 2020 with laptops as per the Department’s Single Device Policy. My Department incurred an expense of €90,156 in mobile communication costs since March 2020 to support remote working. It is expected that future mobile communications costs will be minimised due to the adoption of the BTS Managed Desktop service, which includes a suite of communications tools that further support remote working at no additional cost.

Further, the Met Éireann Division of my Department purchased laptops, monitors and accessories for staff to facilitate remote/hybrid working during the pandemic. The total cost incurred was €153,671. While a number of staff within Met Éireann already had work phones, additional mobile phones were purchased to facilitate remote working during the pandemic. The total costs amounted to €14,822. Additionally, Met Éireann spent €1,042 on broadband expenses for individuals to work remotely.

As the Department is still operating within Government Covid-19 guidance, staff who can work from home are continuing to do so. Arrangements for post-pandemic blended working will be finalised in the Department’s Blended Working Policy, which will be developed based on the central policy framework.

With respect to the State bodies under the aegis of the Department, the information requested is not available within my Department and may be requested directly from the State bodies via their dedicated e-mail addresses for Oireachtas members, as set out in the table below.

#### Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

#### Contact Details of State Bodies for Oireachtas Members

State Body	Contact E-mails
An Bord Pleanála	oireachtasqueries@pleanala.ie
An Fóram Uisce (the Water Forum)	info@nationalwaterforum.ie
Approved Housing Bodies Regulatory Authority	oireachtasqueries@ahbregulator.ie
Docklands Oversight and Consultative Forum	infodocklands@dublincity.ie
Ervia	oireachtas@ervia.ie
Gas Networks Ireland	oireachtas@ervia.ie
Heritage Council	oireachtas@heritagecouncil.ie
Housing Finance Agency	oireachtas.enquiries@hfa.ie
Housing and Sustainable Communities Agency	publicreps@housingagency.ie
Irish Water	oireachtasmembers@water.ie

## Questions - Written Answers

State Body	Contact E-mails
Land Development Agency	oireachtas@lda.ie
Local Government Management Agency	corporate@lgma.ie
National Oversight and Audit Commission	info@noac.ie
National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee	ntacc@housing.gov.ie
Office of the Planning Regulator	oireachtas@opr.ie
Ordnance Survey Ireland	Oireachtas@osi.ie
Property Registration Authority	reps@prai.ie
Pyrite Resolution Board	oireachtasinfo@pyriteboard.ie
Residential Tenancies Board	OireachtasMembersQueries@rtb.ie
Valuation Office	oireachtas.enquiries@VALOFF.ie
Valuation Tribunal	info@valuationtribunal.ie
Water Advisory Body	info@wab.gov.ie
Waterways Ireland	ceoffice@waterwaysireland.org

### Vacant Properties

325. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his attention has been drawn to the geo-mapping work of vacant homes currently underway in local authorities; if his Department is collating this information centrally; and if not, if he will consider doing so. [41964/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** Local authorities are well placed to identify and collate information on vacant properties based on a number of sources of information. As part of Housing for All the Government has committed to a range of actions as part of the pathway to address vacancy and ensure the efficient use of housing stock and this includes ensuring that the Vacant Home Officers based in local authorities are all full-time posts.

To date, each local authority has prepared a Vacant Homes Action Plan for their administrative area. The Vacant Homes Action Plan identifies the scale of vacant homes in their jurisdiction and sets ambitious but realistic targets of the number of vacant homes that can ultimately be brought back into use. As part of this process, the Vacant Homes Office/Officers within each local authority have undertaken initial vacancy assessment exercises (drilling into available vacancy data), and carry out co-ordinating visual inspections / assessment of residential properties in their administrative area, with a view to identifying possible vacant recoverable homes. In this context, among other sources of information, geo-mapping is utilised by many local authorities, with mapping of vacancy is carried out by GIS staff or the Vacant Homes Officer, where resources permit.

My Department does not, however, collate this information centrally, but the broader question of gathering data on vacancy will be considered as part of the implementation of Housing for All. This will include the collection of data on vacancy with a view to introducing a vacant property tax. The Local Property Tax returns in November 2021 will provide a new source of information in this regard.

### Departmental Schemes

326. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41983/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** The Farm Plan Scheme, administered by my Department's National Parks and Wildlife Service, is an important instrument that allows for proactive engagement with farmers in designated sites, to trial and deliver bespoke measures that support biodiversity. Plans delivered through the Scheme have been used to inform the development of national Agri-Environment Schemes under the Rural Development Programme, co-financed under the Common Agricultural Policy.

The NPWS Farm Plan Scheme has been enlarged this year to work with farmers and to apply and test new and innovative approaches for farmland biodiversity. I would hope to continue that process of enhancement next year, budgetary considerations permitting.

My Department meets regularly with the farmers' organisations and I am fully aware that they wish to see an expansion of the NPWS Farm Plan Scheme. The matter is receiving close attention and is being advanced in the normal Estimates process and considered in the context of existing commitments, the overall resources available to the Government and the demands on those resources.

*Question No. 327 answered with Question No. 316.*

### **Housing Policy**

328. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage further to Parliamentary Question No. 326 of 13 July 2021, in relation to HAP eligibility and maintenance payments the reason policy does not provide for the deduction of regular outgoings such as maintenance; and if his attention has been drawn to the fact that in some cases maintenance payments are being assessed as income for both the payer and the payee in cases in which both are in receipt of HAP. [42011/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** In order to be eligible for HAP support, a household must first qualify for social housing support and be placed on a housing list. Applications for social housing support are assessed by the relevant local authority, in accordance with the eligibility and need criteria set down in section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the associated Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011, as amended.

If a household has been deemed eligible for social housing support, it is a matter for the local authority to examine the suite of social housing supports available, including the HAP scheme, to determine the most appropriate form of social housing support for that household.

The 2011 Regulations prescribe maximum net income limits for each local authority, in different bands according to the area concerned, with income being defined and assessed according to a standard Household Means Policy. The 2011 Regulations do not provide local authorities with any discretion to exceed the limits that apply to their administrative areas.

Under the Household Means Policy, which applies in all local authorities, net income for social housing assessment is defined as gross household income less income tax, PRSI, Universal Social Charge and 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. However, with the exception of the specific payments listed in the Household Means Policy as being disregarded, all income from social insurance and social assistance payments, allowances and benefits, and maintenance payments received is assessable. There is no provision in the policy to deduct any other regular outgoings,

such as maintenance paid in respect of family members, from gross household income for the purposes of the income threshold.

When a maintenance payment is made, it will be to cover the cost of living for their children, which is the same cost incurred by a couple with children that are still living together as a family unit. There are no deductions from assessable income for the costs associated with the raising of children for a family unit, therefore there are no deductions for these costs for the individual of a separated couple who is paying maintenance.

## **Fire Stations**

329. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of plans for a new fire station in Ballymahon, County Longford. [42041/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The provision of a fire service in its functional area, including the establishment and maintenance of a fire brigade, the assessment of fire cover needs and the provision of fire station premises, is a statutory function of individual fire authorities under the Fire Services Acts, 1981 and 2003. My Department supports the fire authorities through setting general policy, providing a central training programme, issuing guidance on operational and other related matters and providing capital funding for equipment and priority infrastructural projects.

I recently announced a new Fire Services Capital Programme for the period 2021-2025, with a funding allocation of €61m. Following extensive engagement with fire authorities, a number of proposals for station works etc. were received. The proposals were evaluated and prioritised on the basis of the:

- Area Risk Categorisation of the fire station (population, fire risks, etc.);
- established Health and Safety needs;
- state of development of the project (is site acquired, etc.); and
- value for money offered by the proposal.

- This new Programme will see six new fire stations built, continued support for the construction of a further 12 new fire stations, nine fire station refurbishments as well as the allocation of 35 new fire engines. In order to maximise the available Capital Programme funding, my Department re-assesses the status of projects in the Programme on an annual basis, and some flexibility is normally available to advance projects that are ready and that offer best value-for-money taking account of the state of readiness of projects more generally.

- Project consideration stages in my Department include submission of preliminary and detailed appraisals; submission of design brief; selection of site; application for approval in principle; appointment of design consultants; submission of a preliminary design; planning application; submission of preliminary cost plan, detailed design and cost plans; and tender process and construction stages - each step subject to approval from my Department.

- While a new fire station at Ballymahon is not currently included in my Department's 2021 – 2025 Fire Services Capital Programme, it is included in a list for annual review. Projects in the Capital Programme will be reassessed on an annual basis in order to maximise the available Capital Programme funding. This includes consideration of additional fire station projects from fire authorities which fit the normal fire station project criteria and where an appropriate busi-

ness case is presented. Priority may be adjusted to bring forward projects offering best value-for-money and to take account of the state of readiness of the projects.

- Longford County Council has indicated that the replacement of Ballymahon Fire Station, at an estimated cost of €1.7 million, is their priority. The Council has submitted a preliminary appraisal and outline plans to my Department. My Department will continue to work with Longford County Council to progress the Ballymahon fire station project.

### **Housing Schemes**

330. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of successful applications under the mortgage allowance scheme by year and local authority. [42042/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Details of the applications received and granted by local authority under the Mortgage Allowance scheme are available on my Department's website at the following link:

*[www.gov.ie/en/collection/fd048-affordable-housing-and-part-v-statistics/](http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/fd048-affordable-housing-and-part-v-statistics/)*

*Question No. 331 answered with Question No. 316.*

*Question No. 332 answered with Question No. 316.*

*Question No. 333 answered with Question No. 316.*

*Question No. 334 answered with Question No. 316.*

### **Water Supply**

335. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the review of water allowances for both Irish Water and group water scheme consumers; if he is committed to restoring parity to the limits for each; his views on whether a 41% reduction in the allowance (details supplied) for equivalent households is unfair; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42076/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Review of Demand for Water Services (2017), undertaken by the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities reported that the average amount of water supplied by Irish Water to a dwelling was 125,000 litres per year. Based on this report, the Water Services Act 2007 (Threshold Amount and Allowance Amount) Order 2017 specifies that the threshold amount of water services for domestic customers of Irish Water be set at 213,000 litres per dwelling per year i.e. 1.7 times the CRU's estimated rate of demand by a dwelling in line with the relevant provisions of the Water Services Act 2017. Any future review of the demand for water services provided by Irish Water is a matter for the Commission for Regulation of Utilities.

In 2017, my Department also undertook a review of the Group Water Schemes' subsidies, in consultation with the National Federation of Group Water Schemes, the representative body for the sector. The proposed improvements to the subsidy arrangements were subsequently endorsed by the Federation through a special delegate conference held on 13 December 2017. These improvements included the application of an annual household water services threshold of 160,000 litres per year, as recommended by the Federation based on extensive consumer me-

tering of the sector. The improved subsidy arrangements, came into effect on 1 January 2018. There are no plans by my Department to review the annual household threshold at the present time. Further information can be found on my Department's website [www.housing.old.gov.ie/water/water-services/rural-water-programme/circular-l218-subsidy-towards-operational-costs-group](http://www.housing.old.gov.ie/water/water-services/rural-water-programme/circular-l218-subsidy-towards-operational-costs-group).

In the context of the the recommendations of the Report of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Future Funding of Domestic Water Services (April, 2017) that there be equity of treatment and equivalent financial support between household on the public water system and those availing of private water supplies, the review of Group Water Subsidies has fulfilled the recommendations of the Committee having resulted in substantial improvements in the current funding available under the Rural Water Programme, to Group Water Schemes.

## **Housing Policy**

336. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when he expects the Affordable Housing Act 2021 to be fully enacted; when he expects the new regulations contained within it to be fully realised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42117/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Affordable Housing Act 2021 was signed into law by the President on 21 July 2021. On 18 August, I signed the Affordable Housing Act 2021 (Commencement) (Parts 1 and 3) Order 2021, which commenced Parts 1 and 3 of the Act from 19 August. This brought into operation the Cost Rental element of the Act. The text of the Order is available at:

[www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2021/si/424/made/en/print](http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2021/si/424/made/en/print)

On 19 August 2021 I made the Affordable Housing Act 2021 (Cost Rental Designation) Regulations 2021, which came into effect that day. These Regulations govern the process by which the owners of dwellings may obtain the designation of their properties as Cost Rental dwellings. The text of the Regulations is available online at:

[www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2021/si/425/made/en/print](http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2021/si/425/made/en/print)

On 2 September 2021 I signed the Affordable Housing Act 2021 (Commencement of Certain Provisions) Order 2021, which commenced Part 2 (other than subsections (2)(c), (6), and (7) of section 6) and Parts 4, 6, 7, and 8 of the Act from 3 September. The text of the Order is available online at:

[www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2021/si/450/made/en/print](http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2021/si/450/made/en/print)

With the relevant elements of the Act now commenced, it is my intention to make further Regulations governing Local Authority Affordable Purchase and Cost Rental housing.

## **Housing Schemes**

337. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the net benefit if any to the Exchequer in discounted terms of part V agreements concluded between 2012 to date compared with traditional provision of social housing by local authorities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42145/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Part V of the Planning and Development Acts 2000 to 2020 allows a local authority to purchase a percentage of land (currently up to 10%) at existing use value and to use this land for the provision of social housing support. Existing use value is the value of the land without the benefit of planning permission and is generally less than the market value, particularly for greenfield sites.

The purpose of Part V is to achieve a housing mix rather than having housing estates of a mono tenure. It ensures that all applicable housing developments contain some social housing as well as owner occupied and potentially also private rented housing. The exclusion of developer profit and land value planning gain from the price payable for Part V units means that they can be acquired at less than their open market value.

A local authority's options under Part V to capture the 10% of net monetary value are -

- the transfer of ownership of land, subject to the planning permission application, to a local authority for the provision of social housing (the default option);
- the building and transfer of ownership to the local authority, or persons nominated, of completed social homes on the site subject to the planning permission;
- the transfer of ownership to the local authority, or persons nominated, of completed social housing homes on other land;
- the long term leasing of social housing homes; and
- a combination of the options above.

My Department records Part V unit data based on the expenditure recouped by the local authorities. However, local authorities may take land as part of the Part V agreement and we don't have sight of this until the LA develops a proposal to build units on that land, which may not be for a number of years. It is therefore not possible to provide complete details of the net benefit to the Exchequer in discounted terms of Part V agreements concluded between 2012 to date, compared with traditional provision of social housing by local authorities.

However, I am setting out below data comparing the cost of Part V units acquired by local authorities with tendered costs for local authority-led construction of social homes, for each of the years 2017 to 2020. The construction costs vary depending on design, type of units (e.g. bedroom numbers, apartment/house), and on the level of abnormal cost requirements for each scheme, such as site conditions, demolitions, service diversions and site access requirements. The costs below relate to the construction element only of the all-in delivery cost. Other items that make up the all-in delivery cost, but which are excluded from the figures shown, include the following:

- **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 generally range between 7.5% and 12.5% of construction costs:

- **Land cost** : Land costs can vary significantly from project to project, depending on location and ownership status (e.g. land costs could vary from existing local authority land with 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 elements that can 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.

-	Average Cost Per Unit – LA Construction (excluding items listed above)	Average Cost Per Unit – Part V
2017	185,935	184,971
2018	222,085	215,915
2019	239,837	224,514
2020	205,111	234,373

### Housing Schemes

338. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if persons with a disability are eligible to apply for a Rebuilding Ireland home loan; the number of persons with disabilities who have been granted an loan to date since the scheme's introduction; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42172/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Persons who have a disability and are eligible for a Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan may apply for a Loan.

The final decision on loan approval is a matter for the relevant local authority and its credit committee on a case-by-case basis. Decisions on all housing loan applications must be made in accordance with the statutory credit policy that underpins the scheme, in order to ensure prudence and consistency in approaches in the best interests of both borrowers and the lending local authorities.

My Department does not collect data on the number of persons with disabilities who have been granted a Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan.

*Question No. 339 answered with Question No. 316.*

### Housing Provision

340. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the current number of unfinished developments by each county or local authority in tabular form; the number that are fully unoccupied; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42238/21]

341. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the initiatives that are in place to assist in completing unfinished developments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42239/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 340 and 341 together.

My Department conducted Unfinished Housing Developments surveys with assistance from all local authorities between 2010 and 2017. A Progress Report was prepared each year based on the data and analysis from each survey. The most recent reports and auxiliary data are available on my Department's website at the following link: [www.gov.ie/en/collection/706ac-unfinished-housing-developments-annual-reports/](http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/706ac-unfinished-housing-developments-annual-reports/).

Approximately 3,000 developments were surveyed in 2010. The 2017 survey identified that overall there had been a 91% reduction of ‘unfinished’ developments since 2010 with 256 developments remaining on the ‘unfinished’ list. Of these 256 developments in 2017 only 159 were occupied in some part by residents.

In September 2020 my Department asked local authorities to re-evaluate and assess the remaining 256 developments. These developments were surveyed by the local authorities in September / October 2020 and within this cohort of 256 developments, it was found that there was a 52% reduction in ‘unfinished’ developments since 2017. Of the 256 developments surveyed, the number of developments classified as ‘unfinished’ from the 2017 survey had almost halved to 124 developments nationally, which is a 96% reduction from the initial number of unfinished developments surveyed in 2010. From the 256 developments surveyed:

- 132 of the 256 developments are now being removed from the list of unfinished developments because they are substantially complete and / or active sites that are now finishing. Many of these developments will now progress to being considered for taking in charge by the relevant local authority.

- 124 developments remain ‘unfinished’.

Of the 124 unfinished developments, 326 houses and 13 apartments were vacant at the time of survey in 2020. The table below outlines the breakdown by county, including those that were fully unoccupied.

Unfinished Developments by County, September 2020 LA	Total Developments	Total Unoccupied
Carlow	6	1
Cavan	5	4
Clare	4	1
Cork County	7	4
Donegal	17	7
Dublin City	1	1
Fingal	5	0
Galway County	4	2
Kerry	2	2
Kilkenny	3	1
Laois	3	3
Leitrim	9	5
Limerick	6	4
Longford	1	1
Louth	4	0
Mayo	3	2
Monaghan	1	1
Offaly	3	0
Roscommon	14	7
Sligo	3	1
Tipperary	10	4
Waterford	3	0
Wexford	9	5

Unfinished Developments by County, September 2020 LA	Total Developments	Total Unoccupied
Wicklow	1	1
	124	57

A list of unfinished housing estates can be found under the ‘unfinished’ tab layer on the MyPlan website available at the following link: [www.myplan.ie](http://www.myplan.ie).

In the line with the commitment in Housing for All, local authorities will continue to assess the best options for resolution of unfinished developments and/or developments that are to be taken in charge.

### Turf Cutting

342. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when a person (details supplied) will receive a payment under the turf cutting compensation scheme for 2021. [42240/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** I am advised that the annual payment for 2021 under the cessation of turf cutting compensation scheme issued to the applicant referred to in the Deputy’s question on 31 August 2021.

Annual payments under the scheme for qualifying applicants are generally made from the second quarter of each year in order to facilitate applicants in the provision of fuel for the following winter period.

### Defective Building Materials

343. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will report on the pyrite remediation scheme; if he will consider properties in County Tipperary for inclusion in the pyrite remediation scheme (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42241/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** The regulations for the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant scheme came into operation on 31 January 2020. The Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks in Construction (Remediation) (Financial Assistance) Regulations 2020 provide for a grant scheme of financial assistance to support affected homeowners in the counties of Donegal and Mayo only, to carry out the necessary remediation works to dwellings that have been damaged due to the use of defective concrete blocks. The Scheme opened for applications at the end of June 2020.

Significant preparatory work was carried out to investigate and quantify the extent of the problem in both Donegal and Mayo and designing a scheme to address the issue. My Department is in ongoing engagement with local authorities and local action groups that are currently within the scope of the scheme and with the relevant local authorities in respect of discussions on requests for an extension of the scheme to other counties.

My Department informed councils requesting admittance to the scheme that before any extension of the scheme can be considered, the same rigorous analysis as that put in place prior

to the rollout of the scheme to the counties of Donegal and Mayo would have to be undertaken. There is an opportunity here for the local authority concerned to take a lead role in determining, in accordance with the IS: 465 protocol, that issues arising in homes in County Tipperary are in fact due to the presence of excessive amounts of deleterious materials (mica or pyrite) in the aggregate used to manufacture the concrete blocks and secondly quantify the likely extent of the problem in the county.

Such analysis will provide the evidential basis necessary for the consideration of any extension of the scheme. Pending the receipt of and consideration of such analysis it would be premature to consider an extension of the scheme.

*Question No. 344 answered with Question No. 316.*

### **State Properties**

345. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when a 35-year State property lease pursuant to the State Property Act 1954 (as amended) will issue to a club (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42289/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** I can confirm that the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform has approved the granting of a State Property Lease, pursuant to the State Property Act 1954 (as amended) to Callinafercy Rowing Club for a term of 35 years.

The Chief State Solicitors Office (CSSO) and legal representatives acting on behalf of the Club, are currently finalising the content and terms of the lease. In this regard, I understand the CSSO issued recent correspondence to the Club's legal representatives seeking up to date instructions on certain matters and a response to same is awaited.

Once the process of finalising the lease is complete, the lease can proceed to be executed and exchanged, subject to payment of any funds due thereunder.

### **Housing Schemes**

346. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will provide a schedule of the amount granted to each local authority in respect of adaptation grants for persons with a disability on an annual basis for the past seven years to date; the amount surrendered back to his Department by each local authority over the same period in unused grant aid; and if he can fund local authorities if they deplete their annual allocations. [42303/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** 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 higher levels of grant activity. My Department will give due consideration to any request received from Local Authorities for additional Exchequer funding in this regard.

Details in relation to allocations and funding draw down is available in the following table;

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq346-09-09-21\_en.docx">Adaptation Grants</a>]

### Housing Schemes

347. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the date on which the amounts available to each local authority for adaptation grants for persons with a disability were reviewed; and if he has plans to increase the amount available due to inflation costs in the construction sector. [42304/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** Funding of €75 million is available nationally in 2021 for the Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability Scheme. This funding has increased year on year since 2014. As part of the annual budgetary process, consideration will be given to this funding in future years 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/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ea33c1-housing-options-for-our-ageing-population-policy-statement/)

The terms and conditions governing the grants were examined in 2013 by a review group that included representatives of grant beneficiaries and the local authorities. They considered how the benefits of the grants could be spread as widely as possible and to achieve fairness and value for money in the grants process. Arising from the recommendations of the review group, the income requirements, eligibility and maximum grant were revised in 2014 to focus the grants towards those with the greatest need.

As detailed in Housing for All, housing policy objectives 6 and 7 give a commitment to undertaking a review of the range of housing grants available to assist with meeting specific housing needs both for our ageing population and people with a disability. Officials from my Department will begin a review of the existing grant limits and income thresholds applicable to the grant schemes later this year.

### Housing Schemes

348. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will provide the guidance and or grant aid rules that his Department issue to local authorities in respect of the way in which applications for adaptation grants for persons with a disability are reviewed; if he engages with local authorities regarding the scheme; and his views on whether the scheme is fit for purpose. [42305/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke) :** Housing Circular 41 of 2019, issued 20 December 2019, provided local authorities with revised guidelines for the operation of the Housing Adaptation Grant for Older People and People with a Disability scheme, in respect of private houses. This circular also included a revised single application form for use by all local authorities.

The new form and guidelines cover the operation of the three grant schemes available, namely the Housing Adaptation Grant for People with a Disability, the Mobility Aids Grant and the Housing Aid for Older People Grant, and came into effect from 1 February 2020.

The schemes are means tested and operate on a sliding scale with the highest percentage grants available to those with the lowest incomes and vice versa. Grant assistance is available to applicants whose household income, after disregards and deductions, does not exceed €60,000 per annum. Local authorities must adhere to the income thresholds set down by the regulations, so that the funding is focused on those households that need it most.

Local authorities, in administering the scheme, should always work with qualifying applicants to ensure they get the most beneficial outcome possible in line with their financial circumstances. Engagement with the Local Authorities throughout the year is on-going and my Department provides individual workshops to Local Authorities to offer advice and ensure the scheme is being administered optimally.

The Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability make a very significant contribution to improving comfort levels within the home for older persons and persons with a disability and this in turn reduces the potential numbers requiring admittance to long term care facilities. In 2019, across all 31 local authorities areas, a total of 10,023 applicants benefited from assistance under the 3 grant schemes.

Funding of €75 million is available nationally in 2021 for the Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability Scheme. This funding has increased year on year since 2014. As detailed in Housing for All, housing policy objective 6 and 7 give a commitment to undertaking a review of the range of housing grants available to assist with meeting specific housing needs both for our ageing population and people with a disability.

### **Heritage Projects**

349. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when funding under the historic structures fund will be allocated to a project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42336/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** My Department provides financial support for the protection of eligible heritage buildings and historic structures through two grant schemes, which are in the main, administered by the local authorities. These are the Historic Structures Fund (HSF) and the Built Heritage Investment Scheme (BHIS). The HSF is for conservation and enhancement to heritage structures and historic buildings, in both private and public ownership, for the benefit of communities and the public. The BHIS is a scheme for the repair and conservation of structures on the local authority Record of Protected Structures (RPS). It is designed to leverage private capital for investment in small-scale conservation projects across the country and to support the employment of skilled conservation professionals.

In relation to the particular building you mentioned I am pleased to say that funding has been allocated this year under the Historic Structures Fund and that funding may be drawn down on completion of works towards the end of the year.

The BHIS has been allocated €3m this year, up 20% on 2020. The HSF has also been allocated €3m this year. Details of the projects to be funded under both schemes were announced earlier this year and are available on my Department's website. Details of the 2022 schemes will be made available later this year including details of how to apply for funding.

### **Housing Schemes**

350. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if local authorities are permitted to provide housing grants made through the persons with a disability scheme which are either completed or in construction in a retroactive manner; the guidelines regarding such situations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42342/21]

**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 individual 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.

*Question No. 351 answered with Question No. 316.*

### **Planning Issues**

352. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans for planning reform within Gaeltacht areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42371/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke)**: The ongoing implementation of the language planning process has a statutory footing under the Gaeltacht Act 2012, which is the primary driver in support of the commitment to the achievement of the objectives set out in the 20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010 to 2030.

The National Planning Framework (NPF) reflects this commitment and includes Objective

29 which “supports the implementation of language plans in Gaeltacht Language Planning Areas, Gaeltacht Service Towns and Irish Language Networks”.

Separately, the Planning and Development Act 2000 as amended, sets out mandatory objectives for local authorities, which must be addressed in the drafting of their County Development Plan governing local development policies. Section 10(2) of the Planning and Development Act includes a requirement that, where there is a Gaeltacht area within the planning authority’s territory, the development plan must include provisions and objectives for “the protection of the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Gaeltacht including the promotion of Irish as the community language”.

To provide further guidance in preparing appropriate policies, my Department published ‘Development Plans, Guidelines for Planning Authorities’ in 2007 which address this mandatory objective of the Planning and Development Act. These guidelines refer to linguistic and cultural heritage and the needs of the community in land-use terms for housing, community facilities, employment, tourism and design, including advertising and signage. Individual development plans may also oblige applicants for planning permission to submit certain particulars or information to accompany development proposals in Gaeltacht areas, such as assessments of the linguistic impact of the proposed development, in order for it to be assessed against relevant policies of the development plan.

My Department recently published a revised and updated Draft Development Plan Guidelines which re-confirm the obligations of planning authorities to the development of the Gaeltacht.

Since April 2019, the assessment of all local authority development plans and local area plans is undertaken by the Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR). The oversight role of the OPR includes ensuring consistency with relevant national or regional policies, including those set out in the NPF and addressing all relevant mandatory objectives for County Development Plans set out in the Planning and Development Act, including the provision of Gaeltacht-specific objectives, where required.

In relation to planning applications for development, a planning authority must notify the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and Media and Údarás na Gaeltachta, to invite their views in relation to planning applications for developments which, in the opinion of the authority “might materially affect the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Gaeltacht, including the promotion of Irish as the community language” in accordance with Article 28 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001 (as amended). The decision to grant or refuse planning permission in such cases, and to assign conditions, including conditions relating to language where appropriate, to a grant of planning permission, is ultimately a matter for the relevant planning authority or An Bord Pleanála, as appropriate.

I am of the view that considering the unique spatial and linguistic circumstances relating to each of our Gaeltacht areas, with local variation between communities and the contexts in which the Irish Language is spoken, that the relevant planning authorities are best placed to implement the planning framework of legislation, policy and guidance as set out above. I am also satisfied that there are appropriate planning oversight mechanisms and safeguards in place, which include the Office of the Planning Regulator and An Bord Pleanála.

A number of Irish language groups, including Conradh na Gaeilge, raised matters with a view to improving the practical implementation of the Irish language provisions in Gaeltacht areas. On foot of the proposals put forward by Conradh na Gaeilge, my Department convened a working group during the summer to examine various aspects of the planning process in all Gaeltacht areas. Membership of this group is made up of representatives from the Department

of Tourism, Culture, Arts Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Údarás na Gaeltachta and relevant local authorities. My Department is committed to working with the relevant stakeholders in the coming months with a view to agreeing practical improvements and best practice processes that will support and enhance the important policy and legislative provisions that are in place.

### **Rental Sector**

353. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his views on whether the RTB website should be used to make rental histories of properties public, without tenant details, allowing persons search via address and thus allowing tenants to research illegal increases without the involvement of landlords or estate agents; and if his Department will take steps to implement this.. [42440/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Residential Tenancies Acts 2004-2021 regulates the landlord-tenant relationship in the rented residential sector and sets out the rights and obligations of landlords and tenants. The Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) was established as an independent statutory body under the Act to operate a national tenancy registration system and to resolve disputes between landlords and tenants.

From 1 July 2019, the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2019 empowers the RTB, on its own volition or on foot of a complaint, to investigate and sanction landlords who engage in improper conduct including a contravention of the rent setting laws in Rent Pressure Zones (RPZs). The RTB can impose a sanction of up to €30,000 and publish any sanction imposed on its website – [www.rtb.ie](http://www.rtb.ie). All residential tenancy dispute determination orders are also published on its website.

When registering a tenancy, a landlord is required to inform the RTB of the rent amount and again if there is an update to that rent amount. In setting a rent, a landlord cannot exceed the market rent. In general, a rent in respect of a dwelling cannot be reviewed more frequently than annually in a RPZ, or bi-annually outside of a RPZ. In reviewing a rent, a landlord must complete the Notice of Rent Review (available on the RTB's website) which must be served on the tenant at least 90 days before the new rent becomes payable and requires details of the rent last set for the dwelling and, if the dwelling is in an RPZ, comply with procedures providing for the rent increase restriction and use the Rent Pressure Zone calculator to ensure compliance with the rent setting laws.

A landlord can identify the application of an exemption from the RPZ laws in respect of a particular dwelling in the Notice of Rent Review, if relevant. A landlord must include details of 3 comparable rents in the Notice of Rent Review.

Section 12 of the Residential Tenancies Acts obliges a landlord, in the case of a tenancy of a dwelling in a RPZ, furnish the tenant, in writing, with the following information at the commencement of the tenancy:

- (i) the amount of rent that was last set under a tenancy for the dwelling;
- (ii) the date the rent was last set under a tenancy for the dwelling;
- (iii) a statement as to how the rent set under the tenancy of the dwelling has been calculated having regard to section 19 (setting of rent above the market rent prohibited) of the Acts.

A tenant can refer a dispute with regard to rent setting to the RTB for resolution under sec-

tion 78 of the Residential Tenancies Acts, with a landlord potentially liable to pay damages of up to €20,000. Comprehensive information on rent setting procedures is available on the RTB's website.

Rent data is collected by the RTB in respect of individual rented dwellings through its tenancy registration process and through data exchange agreements under the Residential Tenancies Acts. This data informs the RTB's function to investigate, and potentially sanction, unlawful rent setting. The RTB publishes a Quarterly Rent Index on its website presenting anonymised and aggregated data to safeguard privacy and protect data.

### **Homeless Accommodation**

354. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if homeless accommodation is required to allow residents to remain for the entirety of the day given the pandemic situation. [42446/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department's role in relation to homelessness involves the provision of a national framework of policy, legislation and funding to underpin the role of housing authorities in addressing homelessness at local level. Statutory responsibility in relation to the provision of homeless services rests with individual housing authorities.

The functioning of homeless accommodation is an operational issue for the relevant housing authorities in consultation with the HSE.

From a strategic perspective, within the context of COVID-19, my Department is in regular contact with local authorities and the HSE to ensure the necessary arrangements are in place to protect individuals and families accessing emergency accommodation. Significant additional accommodation is also in place to support the appropriate levels of social distancing in emergency accommodation and to facilitate the isolation of suspected cases. Placements have been long-term and operated on a 24 hours' basis, with food being provided on site. This has minimised the need for people to be outdoors and potentially in contact with others.

My Department, local authorities and partners from the NGO sector will continue to work with the HSE to ensure that the arrangements in place for those experiencing homelessness are adequate and consistent with the medical and health and safety advice that is being provided.

### **Housing Schemes**

355. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the body that inspects the quality of local authority contracted construction. [42447/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The quality of local authority contracted construction is a matter for the contracting parties in the first place, which includes the Builder, Employers Representative, Design and Assigned Certifiers, among others, in addition to the relevant local authority or Client.

Under the Building Control Acts 1990 to 2020, primary responsibility for compliance of works with the requirements of the Building Regulations rests with the owners, designers and builders of buildings.

Since the introduction of Building Control (Amendment) Regulations 2014, (BCAR), great-

er accountability is required in relation to compliance with Building Regulations in the form of statutory certification of design and construction by registered construction professionals and builders, lodgement of compliance documentation, mandatory inspections during construction and validation and registration of certificates. This legislation empowers competence and professionalism in construction projects and establishes a chain of responsibility that begins with the owner.

In addition, under the Building Control Acts 1990 to 2020, Building Control Authorities have strong powers of inspection, enforcement and prosecution and are independent in the use of their statutory powers under the Acts.

In line with the agreed Performance Indicators for Local Government and the Code of Practice for Inspecting and Certifying Buildings and Works, Building Control Authorities are required to carry out a level of inspection equivalent to 12% to 15% of new buildings for which valid commencement notices have been received. The National Oversight & Audit Commission (NOAC) collects and publishes this data. The Performance Indicators in Local Authorities reports are available at *noac.ie*

### Traveller Accommodation

356. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the funding that has been drawn down by Mayo County Council for a scheme from 1 January 2019 to 30 August 2021, in tabular form (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42449/21]

357. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the funding returned to his Department by Mayo County Council for a scheme from 1 January 2019 to 30 August 2021, in tabular form (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42450/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 356 and 357 together.

The role of my Department is to ensure that there are adequate structures and supports in place to assist housing authorities in providing accommodation for Travellers, including a national framework of policy, legislation and funding.

Following a review of the arrangements for the disbursement of funding for the provision and related supports of Traveller specific accommodation a new allocation process was implemented for 2020. My Department has ceased the practice of allocating specific budgets to individual local authorities. Instead, it is open to all local authorities to apply for and drawdown funds at any time throughout the year and this is actively encouraged by my Department. It should be noted that funds are held in the Department and recouped to local authorities on the basis of claims received. Therefore, the return of funds from local authorities to my Department does not arise.

The amount of funding recouped by Mayo County Council for Traveller accommodation between January 2019 and 30 August 2021 is presented below in tabular form.

Year	Drawdown
2019	€0
2020	€215,950

Year	Drawdown
01/01/2021 - 30/08/2021	€227,143

*Question No. 357 answered with Question No. 356.*

### Water Services

358. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if a rural water well grant will be provided to a family (details supplied) in County Kerry that has a substandard mains water supply with persistent interruptions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42503/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department's Rural Water Programme provides a grant for the improvement of a private water supply to a house (private well).

My Department understands from the local authority that the householder, mentioned in the material supplied, and the adjacent properties are supplied by the public water mains and the issues that arise are matters for Irish Water to resolve. The local authority has also confirmed that the householder mentioned does not, based on the terms and conditions of the grant, qualify for the well grant scheme as they have access to the public water supply.

Since 1 January 2014, Irish Water has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local levels.

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

### Defective Building Materials

359. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to pursue those responsible for supplying defective concrete block containing pyrite and mica; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42544/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I have convened a time-bound working group which includes representatives from my Department, local authorities and homeowner representative groups. These working group members are tasked with reviewing the operation of the current scheme. Included within the terms of reference and one of the issues under review is the role of responsible parties and financial institutions.

Full details of the Working Group on the Defective Concrete Blocks Scheme, including its composition and terms of reference, are publicly available on our website at the following link:

[www.gov.ie/en/publication/acflf-working-group-on-the-defective-concrete-blocks-scheme-agreed-terms-of-reference/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/acflf-working-group-on-the-defective-concrete-blocks-scheme-agreed-terms-of-reference/)

Engagement with the Working Group is on-going and in line with a request from homeowners, it was agreed that the timeline for the submission of a report by the Working Group would be extended to the end of September. The recommendations of this working group will inform any changes or course of action that may be required, which will be brought forward in consul-

tation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the Office of the Attorney General.

### **Defective Building Materials**

360. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when County Clare will be incorporated in the defective concrete block scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42545/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department received correspondence from Clare County Council in October 2020, requesting the extension of the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant scheme to County Clare. A comprehensive reply was subsequently issued to the Council in November 2020.

My Department informed the Council that before any extension of the scheme could be considered, the same rigorous analysis as that put in place prior to the rollout of the scheme to the counties of Donegal and Mayo would have to be undertaken. Following further discussions between my Department and Clare County Council it was agreed that the local authority would take a lead role in determining, in accordance with the IS: 465 protocol, that issues arising in homes in County Clare are in fact due to the presence of excessive amounts of deleterious materials (mica or pyrite) in the aggregate used to manufacture the concrete blocks and secondly quantify the likely extent of the problem in the county.

Subsequently a report was commissioned and finalised by Clare CoCo in July 2021 and submitted to my Department towards the end of that month. The report is currently being reviewed by officials from my Department.

Any changes to or extension of the existing scheme will require consideration in consultation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the Office of the Attorney General.

### **Housing Policy**

361. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his views on the way the low income limits for County Tipperary under the Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011 is forcing family members from homes that become subject to the mortgage to rent scheme; his views on the way this is leading to situations in which families become fragmented; the way in which he plans to address this situation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42550/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Mortgage to Rent (MTR) scheme introduced in 2012 is targeted at supporting households in mortgage arrears who are eligible for social housing support, whose mortgage has been deemed unsustainable by their lender under the Mortgage Arrears Resolution Process (MARP) and who have very limited options, if any, to meet their long-term housing needs themselves. The property must also meet certain eligibility criteria. One of the main criteria underpinning the MTR scheme is that it is a social housing option and therefore it is only open to borrowers in arrears who qualify for social housing as prescribed by the Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011.

Applications for social housing support are assessed by the relevant local authority, in ac-

cordance with the eligibility and need criteria set down in section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the associated Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011, as amended. If a household has been deemed eligible for social housing support, it is a matter for the local authority to examine the suite of social housing supports available, to determine the most appropriate form of social housing support for that household.

The 2011 Regulations prescribe maximum net income limits for each local authority, in different bands according to the area concerned, with income being defined and assessed according to a standard Household Means Policy. The 2011 Regulations do not provide local authorities with any discretion to exceed the limits that apply to their administrative areas.

Under the Household Means Policy, which applies in all local authorities, net income for social housing assessment is defined as gross household income less income tax, PRSI, Universal Social Charge and Additional Superannuation Contribution. The Policy provides for a range of income disregards, and local authorities also have discretion to decide to disregard income that is temporary, short-term or once-off in nature.

The 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, an allowance of 2.5% 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.

Where MTR is not an option, it will be a matter for the borrower to discuss with their lender if there are other options available to resolve their mortgage arrears solution. The Abhaile service is a national mortgage arrears resolution service provided free of charge to the borrower and its aim is to help mortgage holders in arrears to find the best solutions and keep them, wherever possible, in their own homes. The Money Advice and Budgetary Service (MABS) acts as the gateway for the service and can be contacted by telephoning (076) 1072000 or by accessing their website at: [www.mabs.ie/abhaile](http://www.mabs.ie/abhaile).

## Local Authorities

362. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the total amount collected by local authorities through commercial rates for 2019. [42575/21]

363. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the total amount collected by local authorities through non-commercial rates for 2019. [42576/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 362 and 363 together.

The funding system for local authorities is complex, with authorities deriving their income from a variety of sources.

In 2019, local authorities had total revenue income of €5.3 billion. This included income collected from commercial rates totalling €1.55 billion.

In addition to commercial rates, local authorities have powers to charge for the services they provide, including housing rents, waste charges, parking charges and planning application fees. Income collected from goods and services in 2019 totalled €1.40 billion.

Income collected from other sources in 2019 are included in the Local Authority Annual Financial Statement 2019, which is published on my Department's website, at [www.gov.ie/en/collection/e103b-local-authority-annual-financial-statements](http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/e103b-local-authority-annual-financial-statements).

*Question No. 363 answered with Question No. 362.*

### **Housing Policy**

364. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if a development of four units on 0.4 ha is exempt from Part V; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42586/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** If the question refers to Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000, section 97(3) of that Act provides that a person may, before applying for permission in respect of a development that consists of the provision of 4 or fewer houses or relates to land of 0.1 hectares or less, apply to the planning authority for a certificate stating that the Part V requirement in section 96 shall not apply to a grant of planning permission in respect of the development concerned. If the authority grants the certificate, the Part V requirement does not apply to the development concerned.

In the period between 1 September 2015 and 2 September 2021 the specified number of houses in section 97(3) was 9 or fewer.

### **Wastewater Treatment**

365. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if there is grant aid available to replace non-functioning domestic wastewater treatment systems; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42587/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department's Rural Water Programme makes provision for grant assistance to householders in carrying out remediation, repair or upgrading works to, or replacement of, a domestic waste water treatment systems where these are located in areas specifically prioritised for environmental protection for the purposes of the grant scheme or where identified as requiring

action under a national inspection programme.

Further information can be found on my Department's website, at [www.gov.ie/en/publication/6cc1e-domestic-waste-water-treatment-systems-septic-tanks](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/6cc1e-domestic-waste-water-treatment-systems-septic-tanks), or from the local authorities who are responsible for the day to day administration of these grants.

### Vacant Properties

366. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the actions in the National Vacant Housing Reuse Strategy that have been fully completed; the actions that are pending completion; the actions that have yet to be commenced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42618/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** The National Vacant Housing Reuse Strategy was published in July 2018. It provides a targeted, effective and coordinated approach to identifying and tackling vacancy across Ireland. The range of objectives and actions it specifies have been pursued in partnership with stakeholders and agencies across the housing sector to address vacancy in our housing stock. The key drivers of these actions are: local authorities, the Housing Agency, and Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs), supported by schemes available within my Department specifically designed to tackle vacancy, such as the Repair and Lease Scheme, the Buy and Renew Scheme and the Long Term Leasing Scheme.

On 2 September, 2021, the Government published Housing for All, which has a specific pathway on addressing vacancy and ensuring the efficient use of our housing stock. This builds on the actions undertaken the National Vacant Housing Reuse Strategy, and reflects a range of actions to tackle this aspect of housing. Therefore the following table sets out the position of all the actions in the National Vacant Housing Reuse Strategy, with reference as appropriate to updates from Housing for All.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq366-09-09-21\_en.docx">Actions NVHRS</a>]

### Approved Housing Bodies

367. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the amounts of capital assistance scheme and capital loan subsidy scheme loans issued by local authorities to approved housing bodies in the past 20 years by year and repayment period in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42622/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Through the Capital Assistance Scheme, my Department supports local authorities to advance loans to approved housing bodies to deliver housing for priority categories of housing need, including older people, persons/families who are homeless and persons with a disability. The loans between the local authorities and the approved housing bodies are, in the main, for a 30-year term and the following table sets out this capital funding provided to local authorities in the last 20 years.

Year	Capital Funding
2001	€54,798,918

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Year	Capital Funding
2002	€78,126,000
2003	€95,864,000
2004	€86,554,713
2005	€80,661,308
2006	€99,361,424
2007	€113,765,517
2008	€156,290,000
2009	€158,512,741
2010	€113,647,625
2011	€38,039,748
2012	€58,044,354
2013	€36,694,334
2014	€34,296,733
2015	€38,004,656
2016	€37,033,116
2017	€54,991,355
2018	€80,650,496
2019	€97,703,057
2020	€95,131,412

In relation to the Capital Loan and Subsidy Scheme, mortgage finance was provided by local authorities to approved housing bodies to assist them in delivering new homes for those on the local authorities' social housing waiting list, with local authorities accessing this funding by way of loans from the Housing Finance Agency (HFA).

The vast majority of the loans between the HFA and the local authorities are for a 30-year term and the following table sets out the value of the loans advanced to the local authorities by the HFA in the past 20 years, which were subsequently provided to the approved housing bodies.

Year	Value of loans provided by HFA
2001	€86,731,757
2002	€86,240,404
2003	€112,701,719
2004	€95,967,593
2005	€76,462,294
2006	€83,488,912
2007	€157,998,996
2008	€234,424,276
2009	€137,112,545
2010	€92,036,932
2011	€44,574,695
2012	€12,983,338
2013	€8,629,016
2014	€6,807,373
2015	€2,605,484

Year	Value of loans provided by HFA
2016	€2,202,791
2017	€1,201,626
2018	€288,652
2019	€7,504,361
2020	€550,620

### Approved Housing Bodies

368. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the information on the governance, management, structures and occupancy of approved housing bodies that will be published by the approved housing bodies regulatory authority; the format for same; the regularity with which they will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42623/21]

369. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the approved housing bodies regulatory authority will issue reporting guidelines and standards to approved housing bodies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42624/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 368 and 369 together.

As provided for in the Housing (Regulation of Approved Housing Bodies) Act 2019, the Approved Housing Bodies Regulatory Authority (AHBRA) was formally established on 1 February 2021. The Act is being commenced on a phased basis to allow for the establishment of the office. Key provisions, including those relating to the drafting of standards, have commenced. Remaining provisions of the Act will be commenced by 1 January 2022 to enable the AHBRA to become operational.

The standards will cover matters relating to corporate governance; financial management and reporting; property and asset management; and tenancy management. The Regulator will monitor compliance by AHBs with the approved standards and will have the power to carry out a standards assessment to assess if an AHB is complying or failing to comply with the standards.

The Regulator has commenced the process of drafting standards and has been engaging with a range of key stakeholders as part of this process. More information on the drafting of regulatory standards is available on [www.ahbregulator.ie/](http://www.ahbregulator.ie/). Following the publication of the approved standards it is envisaged the Regulator will prepare guidance to assist AHBs in the application of these standards

Among the Regulator’s other functions will be to publish such information (including statistical information) concerning AHBs as the Regulator considers appropriate. It will be a matter for the Regulator to determine the format for same and the regularity with which they will be published.

*Question No. 369 answered with Question No. 368.*

### Approved Housing Bodies

370. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and

Heritage if guidance has been issued to approved housing bodies on the disposal of property; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42625/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) are not-for-profit organisations whose purpose is the provision and management of housing for people with a housing need.

As not-for-profit bodies, AHBs are limited in their ability to sell any property on the open market at a value which is less than the market value of the property. While subsequent to the completion of the terms and agreement of any state funding, the AHB is the sole owner of a property and may technically dispose of a property once it complies with its own Articles of Association. Any sale must be in compliance with the Memorandum and Articles of Association of the AHBs and it is the advisable for the AHB to consult with the Charities Regulator in this regard if it is a registered charity.

However, it is a matter of general policy that AHB homes developed for social housing purposes are retained as such. The Tenant Incremental Purchase scheme that allows for tenants to buy their Local Authority home does not apply to AHB homes.

Should an AHB wish to merge with another AHB or transfer its assets to another AHB guidance is available at the following link: [www.ahbregulator.ie/information-guidance/guidance-documents/](http://www.ahbregulator.ie/information-guidance/guidance-documents/)

### **Departmental Correspondence**

371. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when a submission will be dealt with for a person (details supplied) in County Mayo. [42679/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department has been in communication with Mayo County Council on a proposal they have made in respect of the person referenced by the Deputy. The Council has made two social housing development proposals that are in close proximity to each other and accordingly, they have been asked to consider the appropriate use of public funding and resources by combining both developments.

### **Housing Schemes**

372. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to review the tenant incremental purchase scheme to allow those that were tenants of part V houses prior to the introduction of the regulations to proceed with the purchase of their homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42685/21]

**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 Housing (Sale of Local Authority Houses) Regulations 2015 governing the Scheme provides for a number of specified classes of houses to be excluded from sale, including hous-

es provided to local authorities under Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000 as amended, houses specifically designed for older persons, group Traveller housing and houses provided to facilitate people with disabilities transferring from institutional care to community-based living.

The provisions of Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, are designed to enable the development of mixed tenure sustainable communities. Part V homes are excluded from the Tenant (Incremental) Purchase Scheme 2016 to ensure that homes delivered under this mechanism will remain available for people in need of social housing support and that the original policy goals of the legislation are not eroded over time. The continued development of mixed tenure communities remains very important in promoting social integration.

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.

*Question No. 373 answered with Question No. 324.*

### **Disability Services**

374. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his views on providing fully accessible changing places toilet facilities open to the public in all buildings in which his Department and public bodies and agencies under his remit operate to offer persons with disabilities and carers a network of equipped spaces to take care of personal hygiene in safety and comfort. [42741/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** The Building Regulations 1997-2021 set out minimum standards for the design and construction of buildings and works to ensure the health and safety of people in and around such buildings. They are subject to ongoing review in the interests of safety and the well-being of persons in the built environment and to ensure that due regard is taken of changes in construction techniques, technological progress and innovation. Part M of the Building Regulations deals with Access and Use. The associated Technical Guidance Document M provides guidance indicating how the requirements of Part M can be achieved in practice. Where works are carried out in accordance with TGD M, this will, prima facie, indicate compliance with Part M of the Second Schedule of the Building Regulations.

Part M of the Building Regulations aims to foster an inclusive approach to the design and construction of the built environment. While the Part M requirements may be regarded as a statutory minimum level of provision, the accompanying technical guidance encourages building owners and designers to have regard to the design philosophy of universal design and to consider making additional provisions where practicable and appropriate.

In December 2020, my Department established a Working Group to examine the provision for a changing places toilet in certain buildings. A changing places toilet offers larger supported facilities that address the needs of people for whom current accessible sanitary accommodation is inadequate. These facilities enable people with complex care needs to take part in everyday activities such as travel, shopping, family days out or attending a sporting event.

The plenary Working Group has met six times to date, in addition to a number of sub-group

meetings. Draft documentation, which includes Draft Building Regulations (Part M Amendment) Regulations 2021, Draft Technical Guidance Document M – Access and Use 2021 and a Regulatory Impact Analysis, is currently being prepared to support a public consultation in the matter later this year.

*Question No. 375 answered with Question No. 324.*

### **Environmental Policy**

376. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the steps he is taking to address the Status of EU Protected Habitats and Species in Ireland Report's finding that the overall status of estuaries habitats are inadequate. [42789/21]

377. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the steps he is taking to address the Status of EU Protected Habitats and Species in Ireland Report's finding that the overall status of lagoons are bad. [42790/21]

380. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the steps he is taking to address the Status of EU Protected Habitats and Species in Ireland report finding that the overall status of tidal mudflats and sandflats are inadequate. [42852/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 376, 377 and 380 together.

The EU Protected Habitats and Species Report is a key report produced by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) of my Department as part of its work to protect Ireland's biodiversity and natural heritage. The report draws on a very substantial body of scientific work led by NPWS in collaboration with external experts, working together over a period of six years. The assessments in the report help to inform important decisions around my Department's work programme.

There are a number of priority actions that are being taken in my Department and across Government to improve the conservation status of estuaries, lagoons and tidal mudflats and sandflats, and other habitats and species that are protected by the European Union's Birds and Habitats Directives.

The updated Prioritised Action Framework for the Implementation Birds and Habitats Directives was approved by Government in March this year and has been submitted to the European Commission in line with Article 8 of the Habitats Directive.

With regard to coastal lagoons, water quality and hydrological issues are among the main pressures on these habitats. The main conservation measures required relate to the improvement of water quality in lagoon catchments and the restoration of hydrological processes, including once-off infrastructural measures to manage water regimes as well as ongoing measures to reduce nutrient inputs. While measures to improve water quality will continue to be required and delivered through the river basin planning process, specific targeted programmes will also be required, particularly for the large sedimentary lagoons of the south-east coast.

My Department is co-funding a project with the Environmental Protection Agency called CLEAR (Coastal Lagoons: Ecology and Restoration). This project will answer critical scientific questions about the ecological dynamics of our coastal lagoons, as well as a detailed plan for the restoration of Lady's Island Lake in Wexford, one of Ireland's largest, and proposed restoration methods that will be applicable to other sites. This project represents a critical step

in mapping out what specific actions will be required to restore our coastal lagoons. It is due to report in 2022.

With regard to estuaries and tidal mudflats and sandflats, my Department's recent reports have also concluded that eutrophication and damage to keystone marine communities are the key issues driving their conservation status.

My Department is developing Ireland's next River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) 2022-2027, a key tool for the implementation of the EU's Water Framework Directive and for the improvement of water quality in Ireland. The water quality requirements of the habitats protected by the Habitats Directive, such as coastal lagoons, estuaries, and tidal mudflats and sandflats, are being considered in the prioritisation of areas and actions in the new RBMP. The next Nitrates Action Programme is also currently out for public consultation by my Department; this will be the primary policy instrument to reduce nutrient losses from agricultural land to fresh-water and subsequent loads to the marine environment.

*Question No. 377 answered with Question No. 376.*

### **Local Authorities**

378. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if there is a plan in place to address the backlog of housing adaptation grant, housing aid for older persons grant and mobility aids grant applications that have accumulated while pandemic restrictions have limited local authorities' ability to process them; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42848/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department provides funding to local authorities 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 detailed administration of the grants including their assessment, approval and prioritisation, is the responsibility of the local authorities.

My Department recommends that all valid applications should be processed within 6 weeks from the date of submission. However, in the event of a backlog, local authorities should prioritise applications on the basis of the medical needs of the applicant.

The receipt and processing of housing grant applications can and has continued throughout the pandemic and the carrying out of such works was specifically exempted from the construction restrictions under the public health regulations which were put in place. It is accepted however that the pace has been affected by the effects of wider restrictions and revised work methodologies necessary in response to the pandemic. Inevitably this has led to a backlog of applications in some local authorities. Officials from my Department are engaging with local authorities and emphasising the importance of urgently reducing any existing backlog through the provision of additional resources and ensuring that all applications are dealt with in accordance with Departmental guidelines.

### **Housing Schemes**

379. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will identify funding streams or any grant funding available within his Department to

supplement and incentivise the planning and construction of housing projects for older persons specifically; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42851/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Government is committed to supporting older people to live in their own homes and communities with dignity and independence for as long as possible, as this leads to the best outcomes both for the individual and for society as a whole. The Programme for Government - Our Shared Future commits to ensuring that, where new developments are being provided, there is an appropriate mix of housing design types, including universally designed units, and accommodation for older people and people with disabilities.

The housing needs of older people are addressed specifically in several Actions in “Housing for All-a New Housing Plan for Ireland”, which was launched last week. Action 6.2 of the plan requires that the Housing Delivery Plans of local authorities will set out how dedicated social housing provision appropriate to the needs of older people will be delivered matching the scale and extent of housing need for older people identified. The housing needs of older people will also be assessed more widely through the Housing Needs and Demand Assessment Process in accordance with National Policy Objective 37 of the National Planning Framework (NPF) allowing local authorities to plan sufficient provision of sustainable housing in optimal locations to facilitate ageing in place.

Funding in support of a range of housing and accommodation alternatives for older people including supported housing/housing with care is made available through the various funding streams that support the provision of social housing by local authorities and approved housing bodies, 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 and implementation of its 40 Actions will be supported by the provisions of Housing for All.

*Question No. 380 answered with Question No. 376.*

### **Legislative Measures**

381. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to reform and update the legislation governing the establishment and operations of fun fairs including health and safety requirements and legislation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42871/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** It is my intention to bring forward a piece of legislation provisionally titled the Fire, Emergency Management and Public Safety Bill, whose primary purpose will be to update the Fire Services Acts, 1981 and 2003. Part of the impetus for this work arises from the review of fire safety in Ireland carried out in the aftermath of the Grenfell tragedy in the UK. It is also my intention that the Bill will place relevant elements of evolved emergency management practice at national and local level on a statutory footing and also revise the legislative approach to certain aspects of public safety in Ireland, with an initial focus on safety at funfairs.

A General Scheme of the Bill is at an advanced stage of preparation within my Department. The General Scheme has been informed by consultation with the relevant sectors likely to be impacted by its provisions. The shape of the Bill has been considered on a number of occasions by the Board of the National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Management (NDFEM). The Board is comprised of Chief Executive Officers from local authorities, the Chief Fire Officers

Association (CFOA) as well as other Government Departments and supports the general approach being taken in the Bill.

The intention of the Bill is to support and strengthen the role of local authorities. The provision of fire services in local authority areas, including the establishment and maintenance of fire brigades, the assessment of fire cover needs and the provision of premises, is a statutory function of each individual fire authority. The work of local authority fire services has, to a large degree, been underpinned by the Fire Services Act 1981 and 2003 for nearly 40 years. While this legislation has served the country well, and key indicators such as fatalities from fire per million of population have been reduced consistently to the point where they are at their lowest for forty years, it is appropriate now to ensure that the underpinning legislation fully reflects the changes in society and the expanded and more dynamic roles that our local authority fire services have taken on in recent years. For that reason, the opinions of the local government sector have been sought as to the shape this legislation should take and preliminary opinion has also been received from the Local Government Management Association.

Like all legislation, this is a complex piece of work, which necessitates consideration of multifaceted issues that impact on a number of sectors. The current Fire Services Acts 1981 and 2003 have stood the test of time for nearly 40 years. I want to ensure that its replacement also stands the test of time and when my Department is satisfied that the legislation being brought forward is appropriate, balanced, complete and robust. A Memorandum will be brought to Government on the issue in due course, followed by publication of the Bill.

### **Wildlife Conservation**

382. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the details of the species of birds that are currently included in the open season hunting list that have also been identified as a species of conservation concern, either as a red-listed or amber-listed species; if figures on numbers and species of birds killed during the hunting season are collected by his Department; the level of analysis he has undertaken to determine the impact of this hunting pressure on these at-risk species; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42878/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** There are currently 21 species on Ireland's Open Seasons Order. As outlined in NPWS's 2019 Article 12 report, the conservation status of a number of species which are permitted to be hunted at certain times of the year under the Open Seasons Order is declining.

Of these 21 species, 7 are listed as Amber on the BOCCI list (Tufted Duck, Teal, Gadwall, Wigeon, Pintail, Mallard, Greylag Goose) and 8 are listed as Red on the BOCCI list (Pochard, Goldeneye, Woodcock, Golden Plover, Snipe, Red Grouse, Scaup, Shoveler).

The wild bird hunting season commenced on September 1st and, like many people, I am deeply concerned at the potentially unsustainable hunting of birds of conservation concern in Ireland. It is difficult to assess the sustainability of hunting these birds, as there are some gaps in the data on population size and trends and we do not have information on the numbers of birds hunted annually. It is clear that a new way forward is needed, based on scientific evidence, collaboration and strategic action, to ensure the sustainable hunting of birds of conservation concern in Ireland. To this end, I have established a working group in NPWS to determine the next steps and to invite stakeholders to participate in a collaborative dialogue in the coming months to develop a plan for a sustainable future for these species in Ireland.

*Question No. 383 answered with Question No. 316.*

### **Government Communications**

384. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his ministerial phones have been hacked or attempted to be hacked during the term of office. [42928/21]

385. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he has ever used his personal phones for Government business; and if so, if the personal phones have been hacked during his term of office. [42946/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 384 and 385 together.

My Department has no report of a 'hack' of my phone. I have used my personal phone for official business and I have not experienced a "hack" on my personal phone, to my knowledge, during my term in office. *Question No. 385 answered with Question No. 384.*

### **Housing Schemes**

386. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if there is scope to amend provisions relating to the housing assistance payment as it operates in County Galway to reflect the fluidity of movement between the city council and county council boundaries (details supplied); and his views on the possibility of offering the housing departments of Galway City and County Council room to work more collaboratively in the implementation of HAP during this acute time in the housing crisis. [42955/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011, as amended, set down a standard procedure for assessing applicants for social housing support. Under this procedure, a household may apply for support to one housing authority only, which may be the authority for the area in which the household normally resides or with which it has a local connection, or the authority that agrees, at its discretion, to assess the household for support. A household, meeting either the residence or local connection condition, may specify up to three areas of choice for receipt of support in the areas of all housing authorities in the county and city concerned and, if qualified, will be entered on the housing waiting list of each of those housing authorities.

Consistent with the provisions in the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2014, the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) scheme is considered to be a social housing support and consequently households in receipt of a payment under the HAP scheme are not eligible to remain on the main housing waiting list. However, acknowledging that some households on the waiting list, who avail of HAP, have expectations that they would receive a more traditional form of social housing support, Ministerial directions have issued to ensure that, should they so choose, HAP recipients can avail of a move to other forms of social housing support through a transfer list.

Furthermore, local authorities are also directed that HAP recipients who apply to go on the transfer list should get full credit for the time they spent on the waiting list and be placed on the transfer list with no less favourable terms than if they had remained on the waiting list.

Guidelines on inter-authority movement were issued to local authorities to facilitate the movement of HAP households from one local authority area to another in cases where a HAP tenant wishes to access rented accommodation, with HAP support, in another local authority area. Inter authority movement is, however, subject to certain conditions, such as the relevant Social Housing Income Eligibility Bands and confirmation that the applicant’s income is below the threshold in the new local authority.

In order to maintain equity between all tenants in receipt of social housing support, inter-authority movement for HAP will be facilitated without reference to Social Housing Eligibility Income Bands in areas that offer shared areas of choice in their allocation schemes, as no change to existing treatment is involved in such areas. For example, in Dublin, the four local authority areas currently offer shared areas of choice in their allocation schemes.

However, HAP tenants who avail of inter-authority movement, can only be offered access to the transfer list of the originating local authority.

The practical operation of transfer lists is a matter for each local authority to manage, on the basis of their own scheme of letting priorities. The making of such schemes is a reserved function of the local authority and as such is a matter for the elected members.

### Freedom of Information

387. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of freedom of information requests responded to by his Department in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; the number of responses that included documents related to text messages and other phone message communications such as messages sent through an application (details supplied) in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42968/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** The number of Freedom of Information requests responded to by my Department each year since 2016 is set out in the table below.

Year	Number of requests responded to
2016	281
2017	286
2018	371
2019	246
2020	254
2021 (as at 3 Sept)	193

In line with the Freedom of Information Act and Code of Practice, my Department publishes a disclosure log of FOI requests on a quarterly basis. The logs are available at: [www.gov.ie/en/collection/24ae9-foi-request-logs/](http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/24ae9-foi-request-logs/).

Details of the FOI requests responded to, including a description of the request, the origin of the request and the decision, are contained in the logs. Information in respect of the sort of documents included in individual responses is not maintained. Its compilation would involve a disproportionate amount of time and work as it would necessitate the examination of each request responded to.

Should the Deputy wish to submit a further more specific question in relation to a particular FOI request, I will endeavour to provide the information.

## **Departmental Bodies**

388. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the position regarding the National Coastal Change Management Strategy Steering Group; the number of times the group has met since its formation; the current membership of the group; the issues it has considered; when the group’s finding will be presented to Government and published; if coastal communities affected by coastal erosion and flooding will be engaged with by the group as key stakeholders; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42976/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** The National Coastal Change Management Strategy Steering Group is jointly chaired by my Department and the Office of Public Works (OPW). The Group is comprised of senior officials from the Department of Communications, Climate Action and the Environment, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Met Éireann, and the County and City Management Association. The Group met for the first time on 3 September 2020 and most recently met on 10 June 2021.

Further to the initial meeting of the Steering Group in September 2020, a technical working group was also established under the stewardship of the OPW. The work of this group has focused on the identification and initial analysis of data sources, to underpin the work of the Steering Group.

Since the initial meeting in September, the work of the Steering Group is being progressed through a series of bilateral meetings to scope out the extent of the issues, including, inter alia, the threats and effects of coastal change as they relate to the remit of the individual Steering Group members and the wider stakeholders.

To assist and support the work of the group in scoping out the extent of the issues, including, inter alia, the threats and effects of coastal change as they relate to the remit of the individual Steering Group members and the wider stakeholders, my Department and the OPW have been engaging in a series of bilateral meetings in the interim with relevant Departments and key stakeholders.

The intention of these bilateral meetings has been to give an opportunity to discuss the emerging work of the Group and to stimulate the most effective engagement of these key stakeholders. The meetings to date have been very useful in allowing for issues relating to coastal change management to be reflected upon and explored in the context of the particular operations of the participating organisations.

Following these engagement, the findings of the group are currently being compiled into a report which will be presented to Government later this year.

## **Departmental Investigations**

389. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage further to Parliamentary Question No. 230 of 6 July 2021, if the file relating to the investigation, which named two suspects, into the missing file is still in the possession of his Department. [42980/21]

390. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heri-

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tage further to Parliamentary Question No. 230 of 6 July 2021, the reason An Garda Síochána were not contacted in relation to the missing file. [42981/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 389 and 390 together.

I refer the Deputy to my reply to Parliamentary Question No. 795 of 21 April 2021.

I also refer the Deputy to the replies given to Parliamentary Questions Nos. 196, 197, 198 and 199 of 27 May 2015 by the then Minister.

The file in question was not removed from the Minister's office without authorisation but was inadvertently placed with other papers and subsequently found after a period of time. Accordingly, no Garda or other inquiry was required, nor was any file relating to an investigation created by my Department, as there was no security incident.

*Question No. 390 answered with Question No. 389.*

### **Housing Provision**

391. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if a review of the strategic housing development process is underway by his Department; the date on which the legislation expires or lapses; if he plans to extend the legislation; and if so, the changes that legislation will provide for. [42984/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** Minister O'Brien brought a Memorandum to Government on 13 July 2021, accompanied by a General Scheme of a Planning and Development (Amendment) (LSRD) Bill 2021 (the General Scheme), outlining proposals for the replacement of the current planning arrangements in respect of Strategic Housing Developments (SHDs) with new streamlined arrangements for large-scale residential developments (LSRDs). The proposed new arrangements will effectively restore decision-making on such large scale developments to local authorities in the first instance.

The proposed new LSRD arrangements will comprise 3 pillars: pre-application consultation stage, planning application stage and appeal stage, summarised as follows -

- planning authorities will be required to complete the "final consultation meeting" element of the pre-application consultation stage, involving a bilateral meeting between the planning authority and the developer, within 8 weeks of the receipt of a request for such meeting;

- subsequent LSRD planning applications will be generally required to be determined by planning authorities within 8 weeks of receipt of an application;

- the determination of appeals against planning decisions by planning authorities will be generally required to be determined by An Bord Pleanála within 16 weeks of receipt of an appeal.

- The application of these new arrangements is intended to streamline the decision making process for LSRDs, thereby providing greater certainty and clarity to developers regarding the timelines for decisions in respect of such development proposals.

- Further details in relation to the proposals are set out in the General Scheme which is available on at: [www.gov.ie/en/publication/a10f2-general-scheme-of-planning-and-development-](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a10f2-general-scheme-of-planning-and-development-)

amendment-lsrd-bill-2021/.

- It is intended that the Bill will be enacted as soon as possible with the new LSRD arrangements commencing on enactment of the Bill. The LSRD and SHD schemes will both operate concurrently for a limited period of time with developers being able to choose which process to engage with during this interim period. Once the final SHD planning applications have worked their way through the system, the LSRD arrangements will be the sole planning consent system for applications of this scale.

### Housing Provision

392. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will provide a schedule by county of all of the strategic housing developments that are at construction phase as of 9 September 2021; if he will provide a schedule of all of the strategic housing developments that are at planning approved stage; and the duration that approved planning lasts for under the legislation. [42985/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** The Planning and Development (Housing) and Residential Tenancies Act 2016 (the Act) introduced new streamlined arrangements to enable planning applications for strategic housing developments (SHDs) of 100 housing units or more, or student accommodation or shared accommodation developments of 200 bed spaces or more, to be made directly to An Bord Pleanála (the Board) for determination.

From the commencement of the new SHD arrangements in 2017 up until end July 2021, the Board had received 345 SHD applications and had decided 302 cases. The Board had granted permission in 210 cases in respect of a total of 52,311 housing units (comprising 13,199 houses, 29,938 apartments and 9,174 build to rent), as well as 1,330 shared accommodation units and 13,091 student bed spaces under the SHD arrangements. I understand that the remaining 92 cases decided have either been refused by the Board or are developments which were originally granted by the Board but set aside as a result of a judicial review.

The 2017 SHD Regulations provide for the publication of a weekly list of applications received and applications determined or otherwise disposed of by the Board in relation to SHD cases. These weekly lists are available to view on the Board's website at [www.pleanala.ie/](http://www.pleanala.ie/)

Arrangements have also been put in place by all bodies under the aegis of my Department to facilitate the provision of information directly to members of the Oireachtas. This provides a speedy, efficient and cost effective system to address queries directly. The contact email address for An Bord Pleanála in this regard is [oireachtasqueries@pleanala.ie](mailto:oireachtasqueries@pleanala.ie)

The status of individual developments which have been granted permission under the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, is not routinely maintained by my Department given that some 30,000 planning permissions are granted nationally on an annual basis. My Department has conducted periodic research on the activation rate of SHD permissions and the most recent data in this regard, from a review undertaken on 17 August 2021, would indicate that as of end July 2021, works have commenced on 72 (34%) of the SHD permissions granted since the arrangements came into operation. There can be some delay for various reasons, such as phasing of development, in the activation of housing developments post the granting of permission. In this connection, if permissions granted in 2020/2021 are excluded from the calculations, the data indicates that works have commenced on 48% of the SHD permissions granted in 2018 (when the first permissions were granted) and 2019.

Analysis of the end July 2021 position by county as requested is set out in the table below:

Local Authority	Developments with Decision Granted	Developments with Commencement Notices Lodged
Cork City Council	17	5
Cork County Council	5	3
Dublin City Council	49	18
Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council	47	13
Fingal County Council	14	5
Galway City Council	8	2
Galway County Council	3	0
Kildare County Council	18	9
Kilkenny County Council	1	0
Laois County Council	1	1
Limerick City and County Council	1	0
Louth County Council	7	1
Meath County Council	8	3
South Dublin County Council	20	8
Tipperary County Council	1	0
Waterford City and County Council	1	0
Westmeath County Council	2	0
Wexford County Council	2	0
Wicklow County Council	5	4

Planning permissions are generally granted for a period of five years with the possibility to extend that period by an additional two periods, which periods cumulatively shall not exceed five years, to enable the development to which the permission relates to be completed subject to compliance with certain conditions.

The Programme for Government - Our Shared Future commits to not extending the SHD arrangements beyond their legislative expiry date of end December 2021, which has now been extended to 25 February 2022 arising from the Covid-related extension of duration of statutory deadlines within the planning system by 8 weeks in respect of the period March to May 2020.

Minister O'Brien brought a Memorandum to Government on 13 July 2021, accompanied by a General Scheme of a Planning and Development (Amendment) (LSRD) Bill 2021 (the General Scheme), outlining proposals for the replacement of the current planning arrangements in respect of Strategic Housing Developments (SHDs) with new streamlined arrangements for large-scale residential developments (LSRDs).

Further details in relation to the proposals are set out in the General Scheme which is available on [at:www.gov.ie/en/publication/a10f2-general-scheme-of-planning-and-development-amendment-lsrd-bill-2021/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a10f2-general-scheme-of-planning-and-development-amendment-lsrd-bill-2021/)

### Commissions of Investigation

393. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the cost of each commission of investigation under the remit of his Department over the preceding decade. [42995/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** There are no Commissions of Investigations currently taking place in my Department nor have there been any completed in the last 10 years.

The Tribunal of Inquiry into Certain Planning Matters and Payments was established in March 1997 and completed in November 2012, with a number of third party claims remaining to be processed. The cost of the Tribunal was €47,971,722 within the last decade.

### **Local Authorities**

394. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he has engaged with each local authority on recruiting full-time dedicated EU officers; the local authorities that have EU officers in place already; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43013/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Under section 159 of the Local Government Act 2001, each Chief Executive is responsible for the staffing and organisational arrangements necessary for carrying out the functions of the local authorities for which he or she is responsible.

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

However, granular data, in terms of the detailed breakdown of the local authorities which have EU Officers in place is not collected and consequently is not available in my Department. The relevant information would be available from individual local authorities.

### **Local Authorities**

395. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the amount of EU funding each local authority has received per year for the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43014/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** The information requested is not available in my Department.

Details on funding provided may be found on [eufunds.ie](http://eufunds.ie)

### **Defective Building Materials**

396. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will consider the difficult circumstances pertaining to a family (details supplied) in County Donegal whose lives have been made extremely challenging due to having mica in their home; if their request to remain in their home while their new residence is being rebuilt will be considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43017/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The remedial options provided for under the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant scheme constitute a material alteration to an existing building. It is provided in order to remediate the issue of the defective blocks and return the building to a condition it would have been in if it hadn't been affected by the use of Mica or Pyrite in the blockwork.

In relation to remedial option 1, this specifically provides for the demolition of the home and the subsequent rebuild on the original foundations. The option of building a new home, outside of the existing foundations, would not be supported by the legislation underpinning the grant scheme. This legislation specifically provides for the payment of a grant for the improvement of an existing dwelling and not the construction of an entirely new building on a new set of foundations. Under the scheme as currently formulated, a homeowner choosing to build a new home in a different location on the site and not using the existing foundations would disqualify themselves from grant assistance.

The working group which I established to review the current scheme is expected to report by the end of September and the issue of alternative accommodation and the associated costs is one of the issues under review. In addition, my Department is in ongoing dialogue with Donegal County Council on the particularly difficult circumstances of this case in efforts to identify a solution and will continue to provide as much assistance as possible in order to arrive at a suitable solution.

### **Housing Schemes**

397. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when applications can be made for the first home shared equity scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43024/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Affordable Housing Bill 2021, the first ever standalone affordable housing legislation, was signed into law by the President on 21 July 2021.

On 2 September 2021 I signed the Affordable Housing Act 2021 (Commencement of Certain Provisions) Order 2021, which commenced Part 2 (other than subsections (2)(c), (6), and (7) of section 6) and Parts 4, 6, 7, and 8 of the Act from 3 September.

Part 4 of the Act provides the basis for the establishment of the 'First Home' scheme which is to be operated and administered by a newly established special purpose vehicle (SPV). It also provides that I, as Minister, may agree the terms by which the equity support may be provided covering, inter alia, areas such as purchaser eligibility and financial means, the homes that may be considered eligible under the scheme, and the amount of funding that can be provided.

Work on the detailed design and operation of the scheme is advancing and the Government's recently published Housing For All Plan confirms the intention to introduce the First Home Scheme in Q1 2022.

### **Planning Issues**

398. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he plans to grant a further extension to planning permissions for residential housing delayed by Covid-19 and by building supply issues; if he has estimated the numbers of such permissions due to expire without completion in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43029/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** Section 42 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended ('the Act') currently enables the holder of a planning permission to apply to a planning author-

ity for an extension to the period of permission by an additional period not exceeding 5 years.

At present, if an extension to planning permission has been previously granted, the holder of a planning permission may be granted a further extension of duration under section 42(1A) of the Act in respect of a development that relates to 20 or more houses, where substantial works have been carried out, subject to the development being completed within 5 years of the originally extended permission or by 31 December 2021 (as extended by Government Orders in 2020 under Section 251A of the Act), whichever first occurs.

Section 7 of the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2021 ('the 2021 Act'), which was commenced on 9 September 2021, provides a temporary provision allowing for applications for further extensions of planning permissions which have already availed of an extension under section 42, or otherwise under section 42(1A), and in circumstances where no further extension is permissible. Where an application is made to a planning authority for a further extension, pursuant to the 2021 Act amendments, setting out the reasons why a development cannot be reasonably completed within the appropriate period as already extended, the planning authority shall further extend that period by an additional period of up to 2 years or until 31 December 2023, whichever first occurs, subject to the planning authority being satisfied of a number of matters, including that the development has commenced, substantial works have been carried out and that the extension is required to enable the development to be completed. This is subject also to the planning authority being satisfied that environmental impact assessment or appropriate assessment would not be required for the proposed extension of the appropriate period.

The specific number of housing projects which will be affected by the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2021 is not available in my Department. It is not possible for me to speculate as to the number of housing projects, which have already availed of an extension under section 42 of the Act, or further extension under section 42(1A), and which will also avail of a further extension under the amendments introduced by the 2021 Act. Rather, it will be a matter for the relevant planning authority to determine whether the conditions for granting a further extension are satisfied on a case by case basis. In other words, this provision does not provide a blanket extension of duration for a certain class or classes of developments, but rather must be determined on a case by case basis by the relevant planning authority upon application to that authority.

It is understood that construction work has been significantly impacted, with both delays and site closures throughout 2020 and 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions, and most recently with the closure of non-essential construction sites on the 8 January 2021, which sites could only have reopened in April and May of this year at earliest. It is envisaged that an additional extension of 2 years or until 31 December 2023, whichever first occurs, is an appropriate period to address the disruption and delays to construction caused by Covid-19 pandemic and resulting restrictions. This period not only takes into account the period of restrictions on construction, but also addresses delays and disruptions in logistics, supply chains, and the availability of personnel when restarting construction work after the mandatory and unplanned closure of building sites over the last year.

### **Ministerial Appointments**

399. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of formal and informal roles held by a person (details supplied) in the name of his Department or associated agency in the lifetime of this Government; when they were appointed to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43039/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):**  
The person (details supplied) has not held any roles, formal or informal, in my Department during the lifetime of this Government.

My Department does not maintain the requested information in respect of the State bodies under its aegis. These State bodies may be contacted directly by e-mail by members of the Oireachtas, as set out in the attached table.

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

## Housing Policy

400. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will extend the evictions moratorium in the interest of the physical and psychological health of persons seeking homes in a housing crisis; if so, if he will stagger the ending of the moratorium in order that prospective tenants are not pursuing a small number of affordable properties at the same time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43055/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):**  
The Residential Tenancies Acts 2004-2021 regulate the landlord-tenant relationship in the private rented sector and set out the rights and obligations of landlords and tenants. Section 34 of the Acts provides that a landlord must state a reason for the termination in any tenancy termination notice served. The Table to section 34 sets out the following valid grounds for the termination of a Part 4 tenancy by a landlord:

- 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 dwelling is no longer suited to the needs of the occupying household;

- the landlord intends to sell the dwelling within the next 9 months;
- 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.

Under section 34(b), a landlord may terminate a Part 4 tenancy at the end of its term for a reason other than those listed in the aforementioned Table.

The Residential Tenancies Act 2020 was enacted and came into operation on 24 October 2020 to temporarily modify the operation of the Residential Tenancies Acts to prevent any notices of termination served by landlords, in all but limited cases, from taking effect in geographical locations and during periods specified by the Minister for Health in Regulations made by him under section 31A of the Health Act 1947 in respect of which a restriction applies on the movement of people outside a 5 km radius of their place of residence to help protect the population from the spread of Covid-19. These tenancy protections also apply during the 10 days directly following the period specified by the Minister for Health in the aforementioned Regulations. The most recent tenancy protections that applied on foot of a 5km travel restriction covered the period from 31 December 2020 to 22 April 2021. If the Minister for Health makes regulations restricting movement outside a 5 km radius of one's place of residence in the future, the moratorium on evictions will automatically apply in the relevant area during the relevant period.

The Residential Tenancies and Valuation Act 2020 introduced permanent protections to provide new procedures to be followed in the context of rent arrears warnings and associated tenancy terminations.

Any notice of termination grounded on rent arrears must be copied to the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) and will be invalid if it is not so copied. A notice of termination grounded on rent arrears can only be served by a landlord on the condition that a written rent arrears warning was given to both the tenant and the RTB and that the arrears were not paid within 28 days (doubled from 14 days since 1 August 2020) following receipt of the warning by the tenant or by the RTB, whichever occurs later.

The RTB will acknowledge receipt of any rent arrears warning to the landlord and tenant and provide the tenant with written information to enable them to get advice from the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) and on the income and other supports available. If the tenant agrees, the RTB can help them to engage with MABS to resolve their rent arrears and sustain their tenancy. The aim of the new procedures is to ensure that early action is taken to address rent arrears, to the benefit of both the tenant and the landlord.

Where a tenancy is to be terminated on grounds of rent arrears on foot of Covid-19, enhanced protections and procedures now apply for tenants and landlords under Part 3 (Residential Tenancies) of the Planning and Development, and Residential Tenancies, Act 2020 (the PDRTA). The PDRTA provides for temporary modifications to the operation of the Residential Tenancies Act 2004 to provide, subject to certain conditions, that during the period from 11 January 2021 to 12 January 2022 a 90 day (rather than the usual 28 days) termination notice period applies, where a tenant is in rent arrears due to Covid-19 and is at risk of losing their tenancy. The earliest termination date allowed in such circumstances is 13 January 2022. Rent increases are also prohibited for relevant tenancies until 13 January 2022.

The targeted ban on rent increases under the PDRTA is due to expire on 12 January 2022. The Government will consider what measures, if any, are required after this date to support tenants

in financial difficulty due to Covid-19.

The Residential Tenancies Board displays comprehensive information on its website - [www.rtb.ie](http://www.rtb.ie) - including guidance and frequently asked questions documents relating to terminating tenancies during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Departmental Communications**

401. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he and or his special advisers and or officials use or have used services (details supplied) to communicate in the past 18 months. [43075/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department has no records of requests for the named applications to be installed for business purposes by officials or my Advisors on departmental phones. I do not use the named applications for business purposes either.

### **Homeless Persons Supports**

402. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to address the issue of youth homelessness; the number of young persons who have become homeless in the past three years; the options that have been available in the past for such persons; the options that are available currently; his views on whether the current homeless hostels and shelters are not suitable for young persons; the steps he is taking to ensure that young homeless persons are protected from abuse in all its forms and to being exposed to substance abuse and addiction; the steps he is taking to prevent youth homelessness occurring in the first place; if he plans to provide accommodation and services solely for young person's experiencing homelessness; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43171/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department's role in relation to homelessness involves the provision of a national framework of policy, legislation and funding to underpin the role of housing authorities in addressing homelessness at local level. Statutory responsibility in relation to the provision of homeless services rests with individual housing authorities.

My Department publishes a detailed monthly report on homelessness, based on data provided by housing authorities. The Report outlines details of individuals utilising State-funded emergency accommodation arrangements that are overseen by housing authorities. The most recently published data is in respect of July 2021. There were 6,003 adults and 2,129 dependants under the age of 18 years in emergency accommodation during the July count week. The Reports for each month are available on my Department's website at the following link: [www.gov.ie/en/collection/80ea8-homelessness-data/](http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/80ea8-homelessness-data/).

Supporting individuals and families facing homelessness is a key Government priority. 'Housing for All - a New Housing Plan for Ireland', the Government's strategic housing plan to 2030, sets out details on how the Government will approach this challenge, and includes a commitment to develop a National Youth Homelessness Strategy by the first quarter of 2022. Preparing this strategy will involve co-operation and co-ordination between myself and my colleague the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Key operational elements in the provision of supports to young people experiencing homelessness, or at risk of homelessness, fall within the responsibility of a range of agencies and stakeholder bodies, and

it will be important that their views can form part of the process in developing the Strategy.

Upon my appointment as Minister, I established a High Level Homelessness Taskforce, to provide a forum for engagement with key organisations working to address homelessness. The Taskforce is also inputting on the implementation of the commitments on homelessness in Housing for All. The membership of the Taskforce consists of the Chief Executives of the Dublin Region Homeless Executive, Crosscare, Depaul, Focus Ireland, the Peter McVerry Trust, Dublin Simon Community and Threshold. Youth Homelessness is a core concern of the Taskforce and has been discussed at Taskforce meetings, most recently on 26 July, and 1 September, 2021.

The Youth Homelessness Strategy is being informed by the understanding that supporting young people at risk of becoming homeless through strategic interventions can help avoid a cycle of longer-term homelessness.

### **Departmental Staff**

403. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the current policy regarding the employment of persons with disabilities in his Department and in each State and semi-State body under the aegis of his Department; the disability quota of his Department at present; if there is an active campaign to increase the disability workforce from the current target of 3% to a minimum of 6% by 2024; if this quota has now been exceeded; if so, the details of same; if there has been an advertised competition in relation to the quota; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41594/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** My Department is fully committed to progressing the values of diversity and inclusion, promoting a fair and equal workplace for our people, and ensuring that our staff represents the society we serve. Reflecting this commitment, in 2020, my Department's Human Resources Division launched a staff survey on the 'Building Diversity Through Recruitment' staff and has engaged the Irish Centre for Diversity to work towards certification in an 'Investors in Diversity' process.

My Department is fully committed to equality of opportunity in all its employment practices in line with the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 and the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024. The disability quota for my Department is currently 3% as per part 5 of the Disability Act 2005. In 2020, our HR returns of 5.25% exceeded those targets. I can, therefore, assure the Deputy that my Department is committed to meeting our 6% target by 2024.

While there has not been an advertised competition in relation to the quota, my Department's Human Resources Division maintains regular contact with the Public Appointments Service (PAS) and with the National Disability Authority (NDA) to ensure that we are adhering to best practice in this area in respect of all recruitment competitions.

### **Ministerial Appointments**

404. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the recruitment process used to appoint a person (details supplied) to the position of special envoy for freedom of expression; the location of the advertisement; the number of persons that applied for the job; the person or body that carried out the interviews; the person or body that made the final decision; the roles and responsibilities of the special envoy for freedom of expression; and the person or

body to which they will report. [41615/21]

410. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will publish the documentation and records of communication in relation to the selection, approach to and appointment of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41732/21]

411. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the nature of the work done by a person (details supplied) in relation to the Irish UN Security Council seat alluded to by him in an RTÉ radio interview; if this work was paid and or expensed; if so, the sum involved; the advertisements and tendering process including the number of tenders for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41733/21]

412. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his Department or a State agency booked or paid for an event (details supplied); if so, the date the booking was made; the reason for the event and the payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41734/21]

418. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of formal and informal roles held by a person (details supplied) in the name of his Department or associated agency in the lifetime of this Government; when they were appointed to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41908/21]

476. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will provide a list of Ireland's special envoys and the specific remit of each; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43020/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 404, 410, 411, 412, 418 and 476 together.

I briefed the Oireachtas Joint Committee of Foreign Affairs and Defence in detail on this issue on 7 September 2021 and my statement to the Committee is available on the Oireachtas website. In September 2019, then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Ms Katherine Zappone T.D., was appointed Special Envoy for Ireland's candidature for election to the UN Security Council for the 2021-2022 term. This decision was taken in order to bolster Ireland's profile in the final months of the campaign and underlined the importance attached to our candidature across the whole of Government. During her nine months in this role, then Minister Zappone led twenty-five bilateral meetings during which our candidature was raised, mainly with Ministerial-level representatives of countries in which Ireland does not have resident Embassies. These meetings took place in the margins of the UN General Assembly in September 2019, at the International Conference on Population and Development in Nairobi in November 2019, and in parallel with official engagements in New York in March 2020. The role was additional to the then Minister's existing responsibilities and was not remunerated; as is normal for any person travelling on official business, associated travel expenses were covered. The appointment ended on Ireland's election to the Council in June 2020. On 24 February 2021, during a conversation with the then Secretary General of my Department, I asked the Secretary General whether former Minister Zappone could support Ireland's team at the Permanent Mission to the UN in New York. He advised me that he would reflect on it. Several days later, the Secretary General informed me that the United States planned to appoint a Special Envoy to Advance the Human Rights of LGBTIQ+ Persons. In that context, he raised the possibility of exploring whether a similar position for Ireland might add value to the existing work of the Department in this area. I approached Ms. Zappone and asked if she would be interested in principle in assuming a position relating to LGBTI rights, should the Department develop such a role. She responded positively, at which point officials in my Department took the process forward. The

debate on human rights is increasingly polarised internationally and there is debate significant push back against the very definition of human rights and gender equality. Civil society space is shrinking in many countries; and the rights of LGBTI+ persons are being undermined. As a result, many States that share Ireland's approach to human rights have appointed Special Envoys or Ambassadors at large with mandates in these areas. In this context, officials in my Department developed a mandate for a Special Envoy role focused on freedom of opinion and expression, encompassing the human rights of LGBTI+ persons, civil society space, freedom of the media and freedom of association. It was envisaged that the Envoy would engage with peers across the EU and in other countries, and represent Ireland in targeted bilateral engagements and at specific international fora including the UN General Assembly's Third Committee; the Commission on the Status of Women; and the UN Human Rights Council. It was also expected that the Envoy would support international advocacy initiatives around key events such as World Press Freedom Day; International Women's Day; Pride month; and International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. Supporting international aspects of Ireland's National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy would also have been a key element of the role. The proposed remuneration was based on the midpoint of the Civil Service Principal Officer pay scale, excluding the two Long Service Increments. The proposal to appoint former Minister Zappone as Special Envoy was approved by Government at a meeting of Cabinet on 27 July 2021. Ms Zappone declined the position on 4 August 2021. I can confirm that all records in relation to the appointment of former Minister Zappone as Special Envoy on Freedom of Opinion and Expression that are held by my Department, and by me, have been made publicly available on the Department's website since 6 September 2021. I can also confirm that Ms Zappone did not hold any other formal or informal position in my Department during the lifetime of this Government.

Ireland currently has two Special Envoys. Mr. Tom Arnold is serving as Government Special Envoy on Food Systems, a role which was jointly proposed by the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and which is linked to preparations for the UN Food Systems Summit 2021 on 23 September next, and the Tokyo Nutrition for Growth Summit 2021 in December. Mr. Kenneth Thompson is serving as Special Envoy for francophone Africa and the Sahel, a role linked to Ireland's term on the Security Council.

Finally, I wish to state that my Department had no role in relation to organising or paying for the private event referred to by the Deputy.

### **Passport Services**

405. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when a passport will issue in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41619/21]

423. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the passport application by a person (details supplied) will be examined; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42024/21]

442. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his advice on a matter in relation to a passport application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42378/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 405, 423 and 442 together.

With regard to the specific applications about which the Deputies have enquired, the Pass-

port Service has already issued these passports.

The Passport Service is meeting their current turnaround times of 10 working days for Simple Adult renewals, 15 working days for Complex renewals, 40 working days for First Time Applications on Passport Online and 8 weeks for Passport Express for applications which have been completed correctly.

### Passport Services

406. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when a passport will issue in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41620/21]

407. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the passport application by a person (details supplied) will be examined; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41675/21]

417. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of a passport application for a child (details supplied) for which an urgent passport query request was submitted; and when the family can expect the passport to be issued given an impending travel commitment. [41904/21]

419. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of a passport application for child (details supplied) for which an urgent passport query request was submitted; and when the family can expect the passport to be issued given an impending travel commitment. [41913/21]

434. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of an application by a person (details supplied); if the application will be expedited; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42200/21]

458. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a passport will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Mayo in view of the extenuating circumstances of the case.; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42687/21]

461. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position regarding a passport application by a person (details supplied) in County Wexford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42729/21]

462. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position regarding a passport application by a person (details supplied) in Dublin 11; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42730/21]

464. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a passport can issue to a person (details supplied) in County Mayo in view of the extenuating circumstances of this case. [42813/21]

465. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of a passport application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42819/21]

472. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a passport will be issued in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42906/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 406, 407, 417, 419, 434, 458, 461, 462, 464, 465 and 472 together.

With regard to the specific applications about which the Deputies have enquired, the Passport Service has been in contact with the applicants and has provided an update on the status of the passport applications. The current turnaround times are 10 working days for Simple Adult renewals, 15 working days for Complex renewals, 40 working days for First Time Applications on Passport Online and 8 weeks for Passport Express for applications which have been completed correctly.

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 phone or WebChat to make the Passport Service aware of their situation.

*Question No. 407 answered with Question No. 406.*

### **Passport Services**

408. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will examine the passport application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41681/21]

479. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when a passport will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Mayo [43161/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 408 and 479 together.

With regard to the specific applications about which the Deputies have enquired, the Passport Service has tried to make contact with the applicants to provide an update on the status of the passport applications.

The current turnaround times are 10 working days for Simple Adult renewals, 15 working days for Complex renewals, 40 working days for First Time Applications on Passport Online and 8 weeks for Passport Express for applications which have been completed correctly.

### **Vaccination Programme**

409. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the impact a non-FDA approved vaccine (details supplied) will have on admissions to the United States for essential reasons for Irish citizens, given that they are currently ineligible for any other vaccine under domestic policies here; and the representations he has made to the US authorities on the matter. [41687/21]

414. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the discussions he has had with the authorities the USA in relation to allowing Irish citizens and residents visit the USA if fully vaccinated with a European Medicines Agency approved vaccine including a vaccine (details supplied) or who have had a pre-journey PCR test; the result of these discussions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41838/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 409 and 414 together.

Admission to the United States of America is solely a matter for US authorities. Vaccination status currently does not have any bearing on such admissions, for essential reasons, or otherwise.

I know that the current situation is causing unprecedented disruptions and is placing enormous pressure on families, businesses, and individuals. As I have stated before, ease of travel is vital to our economic relationships and for building connections across the Atlantic and therefore ensuring that it can resume in a safe way is a priority for the Government.

Last month the Taoiseach wrote directly to President Biden noting the disruptive impact that US travel restrictions have had, and sharing information about Ireland's successful and ongoing vaccination programme. My Department also continues to engage with the US at the highest levels. I myself raised the question of resumption of travel between our two countries during my meeting with US National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, in May this year. Our Embassy in Washington D.C. continues to reach out to contacts in the US Administration and Department of State on the issue, emphasising the impact of the travel restrictions on citizens in both countries, as well as the economic repercussions. Our Ambassador in Washington has written twice to the US Administration, including in recent weeks, urging them to ease the restrictions. My Department also has a very positive working relationship with the US Chargé d'Affaires and her team at the US Embassy in Dublin and we continue to encourage them to process exceptions to their travel restrictions for those travelling to the US for essential reasons.

At the EU level, following the EU-US summit in June, a joint EU-US Experts' Working Group to exchange information and expertise to reinstate safe and sustainable travel between the EU and the United States was set up, and has met twice since then. Due to the Common Travel Area, Ireland has also had a role in the UK-US working group.

We continue our work to ensure that the restrictions will not have any long-term impact on existing channels of migration, business, tourism and exchange, which benefit our countries significantly.

*Question No. 410 answered with Question No. 404.*

*Question No. 411 answered with Question No. 404.*

*Question No. 412 answered with Question No. 404.*

### **Foreign Birth Registration**

413. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when the foreign births register will be reopened; the estimated backlog in applications; if he will consider reviewing the way the register is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41738/21]

416. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of plans to resume foreign births registration in the coming period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41887/21]

421. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the date for the resumption of processing of applications for Irish citizenship via the foreign birth register which has been paused for the duration of the Covid-19 pandemic to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41998/21]

424. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when a person

(details supplied) in County Clare will receive an application for the register of foreign births; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42052/21]

430. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when his Department will recommence the processing of foreign birth registrations (details supplied). [42157/21]

431. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of foreign birth applications awaiting processing; and if applicants are advised that it can take 12-18 months to process a completed application. [42158/21]

432. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the details of the workflow and the reason it can take 12 to 18 months to process a foreign birth registration application. [42159/21]

438. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when the processing of foreign birth registrations will recommence for new passport applications; the reason processing of foreign birth registrations continues to be paused; if his attention has been drawn to the frustration the closure of this service is having on parents who wish to apply for a foreign birth registration for their child; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42270/21]

439. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of the application for the foreign births registration of a person (details supplied); the expected timeframe in which this application will be processed; if original documentation can be returned to the person given the lengthy wait; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42274/21]

452. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when the processing of foreign birth registration applications will recommence; if he will commit to assigning additional staff to the relevant Department section in view of the huge backlog; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42592/21]

460. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when a passport will issue in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42728/21]

470. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when he expects foreign birth registrations to resume; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42880/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 413, 416, 421, 424, 430, 431, 432, 438, 439, 452, 460 and 470 together.

My Department is responsible for citizenship by descent through the Foreign Births Register under the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956 (“the 1956 Act”), as amended. We take our legal responsibility in relation to Foreign Birth Registration very seriously and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the processing time for these applications stood at 18 months. This is due to the complex nature of Foreign Birth Registration applications and the very high volume of applications we received due to Brexit. At present, there are just over 31,000 applications in the Foreign Births Registration (FBR) system awaiting processing.

During the COVID-19 Pandemic FBR application processing was paused to give priority to the provision of other priority services. Notably, we reassigned staff to the HSE for essential contact tracing; to the Department of Social Protection for the processing of essential PUP payments, and to support the Department of Health with quarantine issues.

These emergency pandemic measures did not impact the provision of passports for essential reasons and we also continued to provide an emergency service for Foreign Birth Registration

in cases of exceptional urgency, or where an applicant required the return of documents. As with many other areas of public service provision, a backlog of applications has inevitably grown due to the COVID 19 disruptions of our normal processes.

The Passport Service is very concerned about this backlog situation and are actively planning to resume processing FBR applications as soon as possible. We will be making a public announcement on specific dates in the coming weeks. My Department is committed to allocating further resources to this service to assist with the high volume of applications when regular processing resumes with a focus on reducing turnaround times to pre COVID-19 levels by the end of 2021. In the medium term, changes to the FBR process to increase efficiencies and improve the customer experience will be delivered under the next phase of my Department's Passport Reform Programme.

In cases of exceptional urgency applicants may continue to contact the Passport Service directly using email address: [travelemergency@dfat.ie](mailto:travelemergency@dfat.ie).

*Question No. 414 answered with Question No. 409.*

### **Passport Services**

415. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps he is taking to address long delays in waiting for passport applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41854/21]

428. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on the delayed processing of passports (details supplied) and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42124/21]

448. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the current turnaround times for new passport applications and passport renewals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42501/21]

455. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when the passport express will open for applications; if the service will be able to provide the normal turnaround time for passports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42639/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 415, 428, 448 and 455 together.

The Passport Service has received nearly 500,000 applications in 2021 to date, with approximately 110,000 under process. The current turnaround times are 10 working days for Simple Adult renewals, 15 working days for Complex renewals, 40 working days for First Time applications on Passport Online and 8 weeks for Passport Express for applications which have been completed correctly.

These turnaround times for online applications begins when all required supporting documentation is received by the Passport Service. For reasons of integrity, the Passport Service is not in a position to process applications that are incomplete. Such applications will inevitably encounter longer processing times.

First time applications for adults and children are extremely complex to process to ensure the identity of the applicant, their entitlement to Irish citizenship and, in the case of children, that all guardians have consented to the issuing of the passport. Particular complexity relates

to the process of application from children born in Ireland after 2004 due to the need to verify entitlement for Irish citizenship.

Customers are encouraged to contact our Customer Service Hub if they require assistance. The Passport Services continues to operate an emergency service for the priority cases.

*Question No. 416 answered with Question No. 413.*

*Question No. 417 answered with Question No. 406.*

*Question No. 418 answered with Question No. 404.*

*Question No. 419 answered with Question No. 406.*

### **Flexible Work Practices**

420. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the measures he is taking to promote or facilitate remote working for staff in his Department or bodies under the aegis of his Department; the costs this has generated in terms of the provision of laptops, desktop computers or contributions to wi-fi costs or phone-related expenses; the number of staff who have applied for permission to work from home on a permanent or hybrid-model basis (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41953/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Department of Foreign Affairs supports the aims of the National Remote Working Strategy and is committed to implementing a model of blended working that will provide flexibility to staff, while supporting the continued delivery of high quality services to Government and the Irish people.

While a formalised policy is currently under consideration and due for development by March 2022, it will align with the Blended Working Policy Framework for Civil Service organisations.

At present, and with the exception of the Passport Office, the majority of staff continue to work remotely in line with Government guidance. This has been achieved through the use of all-in-one laptop devices, the majority of which were issued prior to the pandemic.

Coupled with this, the Department late last year approved the rollout of a Reimbursement for Home Working Equipment scheme. This scheme covers the costs associated with the purchase of a home office set-up subject to certain limits and includes provision for a desk, chair, monitor, keyboard and mouse. To date the Department has spent €156,000 on this scheme.

*Question No. 421 answered with Question No. 413.*

### **Foreign Conflicts**

422. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if concerns raised by a person (details supplied) in regard to the crisis unfolding in Afghanistan will receive a response; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42016/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Last month I announced, together with the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and the Minister of State for Law Reform, Youth Justice and Immigration, that places would be allocated to Afghan nationals under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP).

The IRPP was created in 2015 as part of Ireland's response to the migration crisis in central and southern Europe. It allows a predetermined number of people in need of international protection to be granted refugee status in Ireland. Places on the programme have been allocated to approximately 300 Afghans. Priority was given to those working on human rights issues, including the rights of women and girls, as well as those working with NGOs and European and international organisations.

The Department of Justice is responsible for visas for travel to Ireland, including in cases where people wish to join a family member residing in Ireland. Full consideration, I know, is being given to the humanitarian context in that regard.

We remain fully engaged with the situation in Afghanistan, both at UN level and at EU level, in particular focusing on the protection of the human rights of the Afghan people, and the humanitarian situation. In response, Ireland has offered an additional €1 million in emergency aid to the UNHCR to support Afghan refugees and other host countries. We will continue to engage in the humanitarian response in Afghanistan at the upcoming High Level Ministerial Meeting on 13 September 2021, in Geneva.

*Question No. 423 answered with Question No. 405.*

*Question No. 424 answered with Question No. 413.*

### **Good Friday Agreement**

425. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will provide an itemised list of sections of the Good Friday Agreement; and the status of the implementation or lack thereof of each section. [42055/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The full implementation and effective operation of the Good Friday Agreement and all subsequent agreements is an utmost priority for this Government. The Agreements, as well as the principles and values underpinning them, are at the core of the Government's commitment to peace, reconciliation and prosperity on this island.

The Good Friday Agreement addressed the constitutional status of Northern Ireland on the basis of the 'principle of consent'. The Agreement recognised the legitimate aspiration to a United Ireland as well as that for Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom and affirmed the right of self-determination by the people of the island of Ireland, on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South. This was also reflected in changes, by referendum, to the Constitution of Ireland.

The Agreement put in place a framework which is made up of three strands, together representing the relationships that exist within and between the islands of Britain and Ireland. Strand One consists of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive; these institutions are the basis by which political parties in Northern Ireland share power. Strand Two of the agreement saw the North South Ministerial Council established to develop cooperation and action within the island of Ireland, between the Northern Ireland Executive and Irish Government. Strand Three established the British-Irish Council and British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference to promote relations East-West between Ireland and Britain.

The agreement also looks at issues related to Citizenship; Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity; Decommissioning; Security; Policing and Justice and Prisoners.

The Peace Process has succeeded over the last two decades in moving definitively beyond the violence of the Troubles. However, it is necessarily an ongoing process, requiring the continued active oversight and involvement of the two Governments as co-guarantors. Since the conclusion of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, it has been necessary to pursue a series of successive further political and legal agreements to consolidate the peace settlement provided for in the GFA and to address crises of political confidence in Northern Ireland.

In 2005, the Independent Decommissioning Body confirmed that IRA decommissioning had taken place. In 2006, the St. Andrew's Agreement was published, which set out a path to full devolution of policing and justice and a stable power-sharing arrangement. In 2010, the signing of the Hillsborough Agreement allowed for the devolution of policing and justice powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly, which then began later that year.

In 2014, the Stormont House Agreement was reached. The Stormont House Agreement envisaged the establishment of a new institutional framework for dealing with the past. Addressing the difficult legacy of the past remains an ongoing challenge at the core of the Peace Process, and as the Deputy will be aware, a process of intense engagement in currently underway with respect to legacy.

Following the collapse of the Executive in 2017, there was a three year absence of the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement before the New Decade, New Approach agreement was reached and they were restored to operation. The North South Ministerial Council has begun its vital work again, with two plenaries and a range of sectoral meetings now having taken place. The Government is committed to working in support of the full implementation of the NDNA and our own commitments. We also look forward to enhanced roles for the British Irish Council and British Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC), as set out in the Programme for Government. A BIIGC took place on 24 June, with the next meeting planned for later this year. The first NDNA Implementation Review meeting took place on 11 January, and a second is planned in the weeks ahead.

A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland is a central provision of the GFA. An Ad-Hoc Assembly Committee has been established, and the Committee published its research paper on the "Key Issues for a Bill of Rights" in March 2020, and launched a public consultation in May. The Government remains firmly committed to the provision of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

All parties to the GFA recognised the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, which in Northern Ireland includes the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic communities. There is now a commitment in place from the British Government to legislate to implement the relevant provisions of the NDNA agreement if the Northern Ireland Assembly has not done so by October. Progress has also been made regarding the Government's commitments supporting the Irish language in Northern Ireland, including the allocation of: €3m as part of the commitment in Budget 2021 for Irish language broadcasting; €1.8m over three years (2020-22) to support the Irish language in Northern Ireland; and an All Island expansion of existing Irish Language Network strategy.

The Government continues to support the establishment of a dedicated structure for civic engagement by the Northern Ireland Executive as set out in the Good Friday Agreement under Strand One. In the NDNA agreement, it was agreed that the Compact Civic Advisory Panel would be reformed to propose the most appropriate model for civic engagement on specific issues.

The Government also continues to support the establishment of the North South Consultative Forum, as provided for under Strand Two of the GFA, and has worked to move the issue

forward, submitting proposals to the Northern Ireland Executive for its consideration. We have also raised the issue at successive plenary meetings of the North South Ministerial Council.

### **Departmental Expenditure**

426. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the total amount of funding provided to date through his Department to UNESCO for its programme on comprehensive sexuality education; the countries in Africa that have been and will be supported by such funding; his plans to continue funding this UNESCO programme into the future and if so, the amounts to be allocated; if his attention has been drawn to the actual content of the programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42106/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** My Department has supported the UNESCO programme, Our Rights, Our Lives, Our Future (O3) since 2017, providing €1,850,000 in funding to-date. As part of the programme, which is the largest comprehensive sexuality education programme in Africa, funding from Ireland supports the empowerment, health and resilience of adolescents and young people in Ethiopia, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. This support is in line with A Better World, the Government's policy for international development and is part of Irish Aid, the Government's development cooperation programme. My Department intends to continue to support the O3 programme in 2022.

### **Foreign Conflicts**

427. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his attention has been drawn to the situation in Pakistan (details supplied); if discussions have taken place within his Department in respect of the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42110/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Our Embassy in Ankara, which is accredited to Pakistan, is aware of the situation in question which arose out of alleged blasphemy charges against a minor. Media reports, based on comments by the Prime Minister's Special Representative on Interfaith Harmony, indicate that the case against the minor has been closed and that action is being taken against the police officers who registered the case.

Ireland has consistently condemned all forms of persecution on the basis of religion or belief, irrespective of where they occur or who the victims are. The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is guaranteed by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which has been ratified by Pakistan. I am concerned by reports regarding the position of religious minority groups in Pakistan and alleged misuse of blasphemy laws.

Ireland actively engages with Pakistan on human rights issues both bilaterally and multilaterally through EU and UN channels. In the context of our bilateral relationship Ambassador Sonya McGuinness met with Pakistan's Federal Minister for Human Rights, Shireen Mazari, earlier this year to discuss human rights challenges in Pakistan, including freedom of religion.

EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Mr. Eamon Gilmore also met with Minister Mazari, as part of ongoing EU-Pakistan human rights dialogue in the context of the EU's Strategic Engagement Plan (SEP) with Pakistan which aims at strengthening cooperation in many areas, including to "enhance intercultural and inter-faith dialogue and understanding to promote tolerance and harmony".

Most recently, at the EU-Pakistan Joint Commission in June 2021, the EU raised its concerns specifically about the abuse of blasphemy laws by certain groups. Ireland participates actively in EU dialogues with Pakistan.

*Question No. 428 answered with Question No. 415.*

### **European Union**

429. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will address a series of matters (details supplied) in relation to European court cases. [41465/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Details of 237 cases before the Court of Justice of the European Union, the General Court of the European Union and the Court of Justice of the European Free Trade Association on which Ireland made Statements in Intervention or made Observations between the years of 2010 and 2020 are set out in the table below. The table includes a small number of cases from the period 2003-2009 which were still ongoing in 2010.

[<ahref="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq429-09-09-21\_en.docx">Cases</a>]

*Question No. 430 answered with Question No. 413.*

*Question No. 431 answered with Question No. 413.*

*Question No. 432 answered with Question No. 413.*

### **Humanitarian Access**

433. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the measures taken by his Department to assist in the transfer and relocation of Afghan citizens following the takeover of the government of Afghanistan by the Taliban; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42177/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Last month I announced, together with the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and the Minister of State for Law Reform, Youth Justice and Immigration, that places would be allocated to Afghan nationals under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP).

The IRPP was created in 2015 as part of Ireland's response to the migration crisis in central and southern Europe. It allows a predetermined number of people in need of international protection to be granted refugee status in Ireland. Places on the programme have been allocated to approximately 300 Afghans. Priority was given to those working on human rights issues, including the rights of women and girls, as well as those working with NGOs and European and international organisations.

Meanwhile, we are liaising with partners, including those who have a presence on the ground, to advise on safe options for Irish citizens and immediate family members, and people who have a right to Irish residency who are in Afghanistan, who wish to leave the country in the period ahead.

We remain fully engaged with the situation in Afghanistan, both at UN level and at EU

level, in particular focusing on the protection of the human rights of the Afghan people, and the humanitarian situation in that country. In response, Ireland has offered an additional €1 million in emergency aid to the UNHCR to support Afghan refugees and other host countries. We will continue to engage in the humanitarian response in Afghanistan at the upcoming High Level Ministerial Meeting on 13 September 2021, in Geneva.

*Question No. 434 answered with Question No. 406.*

### **Foreign Conflicts**

435. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position of Ireland regarding recent political events in Afghanistan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42245/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I am gravely concerned at recent developments in Afghanistan. In particular I am concerned at the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation, the Taliban's approach to human rights, and to the rights of women and girls and minorities in particular, as well as the need for safe passage out of Afghanistan for foreign nationals and at-risk Afghans.

I have raised these issues internationally, including at the UN Security Council. At an emergency meeting of the Council on Afghanistan on 16 August, Ireland reiterated earlier calls on the Taliban to end its violent campaign, called for compliance with international humanitarian and human rights law and the protection of civilians, and highlighted the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan.

Ireland worked intensively with other Council members on the adoption of Security Council Resolution 2593/21 on 30 August. That Resolution strongly condemned the Kabul Airport attacks on 26 August, reaffirmed the importance of human rights, humanitarian assistance, and the need to allow safe passage. Language proposed by Ireland on the importance of ensuring the full, equal and meaningful participation of women in a negotiated political settlement is a key part of that Resolution and its adoption by the Council has sent a clear and united message to the Taliban.

I will also be chairing a meeting of the Council on Afghanistan on 9 September. A key issue at that meeting will be the future role of the UN Assistance Mission and how it can contribute to supporting the people of Afghanistan, ensuring humanitarian access, and protecting the rights of Afghan women and girls to education, healthcare, and participation in public life.

I also participated in detailed discussions on Afghanistan with EU Foreign Ministers and EU Defence Ministers at our informal meetings in Slovenia on 2-3 September. EU Ministers agreed that engagement with any future Afghan government will be conditional on criteria including a peaceful and inclusive political settlement and respect for fundamental rights of all Afghans, particularly women and girls, and minorities. EU Council Conclusions outlining this position in more detail are likely to be adopted in the coming week.

At national level, on 16 August I announced, with the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Minister for Justice, that places would be allocated immediately to vulnerable Afghan nationals under the Refugee Protection Programme. Approximately 300 places have since been allocated. Priority has been given to those working on human rights issues, including the rights of women and girls, as well as those working with NGOs, independent media and European and international organisations.

Finally, I have approved the provision of an additional €1 million in humanitarian support to the UN High Commission for Refugees to help the people of Afghanistan and those who have fled to neighbouring countries.

### **Defence Forces**

436. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on the recent ECAT mission sent to Kabul airport; the role of Dáil Éireann in this regard if any; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42246/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** An Emergency Civil Assistance Team (ECAT) deployment is provided for in Section 3(f) of the Defence (Amendment) Act, 2006. This states that a contingent or member of the Permanent Defence Force may, with the prior approval of and on the authority of the Government, be dispatched for service outside the State for the purposes of “undertaking humanitarian tasks in response to an actual or potential disaster or emergency”.

On the recommendation of the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Defence, and taking into consideration the security advice and a threat assessment from the Defence Forces, I approved the deployment of an ECAT mission to Hamad Karzai International Airport, Kabul, Afghanistan, on 23 August.

The ECAT team comprised two officials from my Department, one of whom led the Mission, and nine members of the Defence Forces. The ECAT deployed in the early hours of Tuesday 24 August with the support of the French Armed Forces. This was a short-term support to the consular response to the situation in Afghanistan. The goal of the ECAT Mission was to provide consular advice and assistance, including by assisting in the process of safe evacuation.

The ECAT Mission built on the close cooperation and coordination on the evacuation process through Hamad Karzai International Airport which was ongoing with EU Member States, the UK, the US and other partners. Ten Irish citizens had been successfully evacuated between 17 and 22 August. It became clear however that there were enormous challenges for people to get to the airport safely, and to gain access when there. With the support of ECAT, which operated within the environs of the airport, 26 Irish citizens and residents were successfully supported to evacuate Afghanistan.

There are approximately 70 Irish citizens and dependents still in Afghanistan, the majority of whom, in addition to a number of Afghan citizens with Irish residency, have expressed a desire to leave the country. My Department, and the Embassy of Ireland in Abu Dhabi, continues to provide assistance and advice in that regard. We are liaising with partners, including those who have a presence on the ground, to explore safe options for exit in the period ahead.

### **Passport Services**

437. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if consideration is being given to reducing the two year waiting time for a person to change their name on their passport after having their name changed by deed poll; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42256/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** All passport applications are subject to the terms of the Passports Act, 2008, as amended (“the Act”). The Act provides a legal

basis for the various policies and procedures that are applied by the Passport Service in the issue of passports.

Section 10 of the Act provides that a passport will issue in the name of a citizen as it appears on his/her birth certificate or naturalisation certificate. However, a name change for a passport from that which appears on a person's birth certificate is permitted under the Act in situations such as marriage, civil partnership etc. where civil, or legal documents are available to verify this change

In cases where name change arises, other than by marriage or civil partnership etc, the Act requires evidence of the use of this new name over a two year period. In very sensitive cases there is discretion under the Act for accepting evidence of usage for less than two years.

The question of what a person's name is at any given moment in time depends upon its usage and the evidence to support the constant and sustained use of this new identity. Evidence of this for at least two years' through documentation such as bills/bank statements/official correspondence is required as a deed poll is not adequate evidence of the constant use of a new name. This policy seeks to protect the integrity and security of the Irish passport and guard against passport or identity fraud.

*Question No. 438 answered with Question No. 413.*

*Question No. 439 answered with Question No. 413.*

### **Foreign Conflicts**

440. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps he plans to take in relation to aid and the relocation of Afghan citizens at risk of torture and murder given the escalating humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42275/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Government through its Official Development Assistance (ODA) programme, Irish Aid, announced funding of €1m in humanitarian support for the people of Afghanistan in mid-August. This funding will be channeled to the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and is on top of €1m already provided to support humanitarian relief in Afghanistan in 2021. In addition, Ireland contributes to global funds and core funding to key agencies that allocate funding to Afghanistan, including through the EU, WHO, UNHCR, IFRC, ICRC and the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF).

Ireland will continue to engage, including at the UN Security Council, to support peace in Afghanistan and to protect and promote the human rights of all Afghans, especially for women and girls. Ireland has also called for full and safe humanitarian access to allow life-saving support to reach all Afghans, including to respond to the urgent needs of families forced to flee their homes.

With regards to relocation, last month I announced, together with the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and the Minister of State for Law Reform, Youth Justice and Immigration, that places would be allocated to Afghan nationals under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP).

The IRPP was created in 2015 as part of Ireland's response to the migration crisis in central and southern Europe. It allows a predetermined number of people in need of international protection to be granted refugee status in Ireland. Places on the programme have been allocated

to approximately 300 Afghans. Priority was given to those working on human rights issues, including the rights of women and girls, as well as those working with NGOs and European and international organisations.

We remain fully engaged with the situation in Afghanistan, both at UN level and at EU level, in particular focusing on the protection of the human rights of the Afghan people, and the humanitarian situation in that country. In response, Ireland has offered an additional €1 million in emergency aid to the UNHCR to support Afghan refugees and other host countries. We will continue to engage in the humanitarian response in Afghanistan at the upcoming High Level Ministerial Meeting on 13 September 2021, in Geneva.

### **Foreign Conflicts**

441. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps he plans to take specifically in relation to female academics and legal academics who have received death threats given the escalating humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42276/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Last month I announced, together with the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and the Minister of State for Law Reform, Youth Justice and Immigration, that places would be allocated to Afghan nationals under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP).

The IRPP was created in 2015 as part of Ireland's response to the migration crisis in central and southern Europe. It allows a predetermined number of people in need of international protection to be granted refugee status in Ireland. Places on the programme have been allocated to approximately 300 Afghans. Priority was given to those working on human rights issues, including the rights of women and girls, as well as those working with NGOs and European and international organisations.

We remain fully engaged with the situation in Afghanistan, both at UN level and at EU level, in particular focussing on the protection of the human rights of the Afghan people, and the humanitarian situation in that country. In response, Ireland has offered an additional €1 million in emergency aid to the UNHCR to support Afghan refugees and other host countries. We will continue to engage in the humanitarian response in Afghanistan at the upcoming High Level Ministerial Meeting on 13 September 2021, in Geneva.

*Question No. 442 answered with Question No. 405.*

### **Foreign Birth Registration**

443. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a person [details supplied] is included on the foreign births register; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42419/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** My Department is responsible for citizenship by descent through the Foreign Births Register. Based on the information provided by the Deputy, there is no corresponding entry for this individual on the Register.

They may however be entitled to apply for citizenship by Foreign Births Registration if one of their grandparents was born in Ireland. Further information on entitlement and documentary requirements can be found on the Department's website at [www.dfa.ie](http://www.dfa.ie).

## Passport Services

444. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if there is a discretionary process to renew a passport card in circumstances in which an old age pensioner has very limited finances (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42442/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Passport Service does not provide a reduced fee to any category of adult applicant for a passport or passport card, whether for the renewal of a passport or for a first time application.

## Visa Agreements

445. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of E3 visas between the United States of America and Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42478/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Immigration issues remain a key priority for the Government in our relationship with the United States. This includes working towards secure legal pathways for Irish people to live and work in the US as well as addressing the situation of undocumented Irish. We have continued to raise these matters in our engagement with successive US Administrations, Members of the US Congress, and leaders from across the political spectrum. The Taoiseach raised the matter in March this year while meeting with President Biden during his St. Patrick's Day virtual visit. He also discussed the issue of the E3 visa bill, and of creating pathways to citizenship, with the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi.

I am glad to see that immigration issues, including possible pathways to citizenship, are a priority for President Biden, as demonstrated by his proposed US Citizenship Act of 2021. We continue to pursue the E3 Visa Bill, which, if passed, could allow access to thousands of US visas each year to Irish citizens, providing new opportunities to live and work in the US. Our Embassy in Washington D.C. continues its extensive outreach in support of the Bill, working with a range of Members of the US House of Representatives and the Senate. We will seek the reintroduction of the Bill to Congress at the earliest opportunity.

We will also continue to actively engage with the Administration as they pursue comprehensive immigration reform in the US.

## Consular Services

446. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his attention has been drawn to the difficulties that persons have had in making contact with the Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan; if he will provide appropriate contact details for the embassy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42499/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. There is no resident Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan in Dublin. The Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan in London is accredited on a non-resident basis to Ireland.

The postal address of the Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the United Kingdom is 1 Holland Park, London, W11 3RP. The general switch number for the Embassy is 0044 020 7229 7679.

Email addresses for the different sections of the Embassy are:

General - info@uzembassy.uk

Political Affairs - politics@uzembassy.uk

Consular Section -consul@uzembassy.uk

Trade & Investment - economy@uzembassy.uk

Culture & Education -culture@uzembassy.uk

Ambassador's Office - secretary@uzembassy.uk

My officials will be happy to follow up with the Deputy in relation to any specific query.

### Passport Services

447. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of standard passport applications and renewals that are currently awaiting processing to date in 2021, broken down by each county in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42500/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Passport Service has received nearly 500,000 applications in 2021 to date, with approximately 110,000 under process. The current turnaround times are 10 working days for Simple Adult renewals, 15 working days for Complex renewals, 40 working days for First Time applications on Passport Online and 8 weeks for Passport Express for applications which have been completed correctly.

The approximate number of complete Passport Online book applications per county under process currently in the system is set out in the following table.

DONEGAL	1,300
DOWN	3,500
DUBLIN	1,600
FERMANAGH	400
GALWAY	2,600
KERRY	1,300
KILDARE	2,700
KILKENNY	800
LAOIS	800
LEITRIM	300
LIMERICK	1,900
LONGFORD	300
LOUTH	1,500
MAYO	1,200
MEATH	2,300
MONAGHAN	500
OFFALY	700
ROSCOMMON	500
SLIGO	600

TIPPERARY	1,400
TYRONE	1,200
WATERFORD	1,200
WESTMEATH	800
WEXFORD	1,400
WICKLOW	1,700

These figures are correct to 3 September 2021.

There are currently approximately 9,463 paper based applications in the system. It is not possible to break these down by county.

*Question No. 448 answered with Question No. 415.*

### Residency Permits

449. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the efforts being made to repatriate to Ireland Irish nationals and Afghans currently in Afghanistan who have Irish residency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42507/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** There are approximately 70 Irish citizens and dependents currently in Afghanistan, the majority of whom, in addition to a number of Afghan citizens with Irish residency, have expressed a desire to leave the country. My Department, and our Embassy of Ireland in Abu Dhabi, continues to provide assistance and advice in that regard.

Since the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, there has been close cooperation and coordination on evacuation with EU Member States, the UK, the US and other partners. The Emergency Civil Assistance Team (ECAT) which I deployed, led by the Department of Foreign Affairs and with participation of Defence Forces personnel, succeeded in enabling 26 Irish citizens and residents to evacuate safely through Hamad Karzai International Airport, following on from the earlier evacuation of 10 Irish citizens.

The UN Security Council, of which Ireland currently holds the Presidency, passed a Resolution on 30 August that calls for the Taliban to facilitate safe passage for people wishing to leave Afghanistan, allow humanitarians to access the country, and uphold human rights, including for women and children.

We will continue to liaise with partners, including those who have a presence on the ground, to explore safe options for exit in the period ahead.

### Human Rights

450. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his attention has been drawn to the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42518/21]

467. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the measures he is prepared to take in order to protest at the imprisonment for human rights activism of persons (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42842/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 450 and 467 together.

I note with concern the details in the cases referred to by the Deputies.

Respect for human rights is an integral part of Ireland's foreign policy and we consistently seek to raise our concerns on human rights issues through the most appropriate and effective channels.

Officials from my Department have raised concerns over the human rights situation in Bahrain directly with the Bahraini authorities, including the specific case of Dr. Abduljalil Alsingace.

Our active participation at the UN Human Rights Council is a particularly important fora in which to raise our concerns regarding human rights. Ireland has raised the human rights issues in Bahrain at the Human Rights Council in the form of national statements and through support to EU Statements.

Ireland also engages on the issue of human rights in Bahrain as a member of the European Union. At the most recent EU-Bahrain Human Rights Dialogue in February 2021, issues of concern were raised by the EU including rule of law, prison conditions, right to a fair trial, freedom of expression, freedom of association, death penalty, torture and the impact of Covid-19 on the human rights situation.

The EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Eamon Gilmore, has also made representations to the Bahraini authorities on human rights issues, including the detention of a number of individuals, including Mr. Hasan Mushaima.

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

### **Human Rights**

451. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of a person (details supplied); if he has spoken to Chinese authorities on the person's case; his plans to ensure the person's safe return; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42585/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** This is a complex case involving an Irish citizen who has been prevented from leaving China since March 2019. My Department has been providing ongoing consular assistance to the citizen since that time through our Consular Assistance Unit in Dublin, our Embassy in Beijing and our Consulate General in Shanghai, while he and his legal teams work on the legal, commercial and financial issues through the appropriate channels. Our Consul General has met and engaged very regularly with the citizen, and continues to provide all possible consular advice and support.

There has also been extensive and regular engagement at the most senior political and diplomatic level with the Chinese authorities in Beijing and Shanghai, and with the Embassy of China in Dublin, in relation to the humanitarian aspects of this case, and the importance of the citizen being allowed to return home as soon as possible. During my visit to China in May this year I discussed the case with a view to achieving a resolution of the matter.

As the Deputy will appreciate, as with all consular cases, it would not be appropriate to comment on the specific details of the case. However, I can assure the Deputy that my Department will continue to provide all possible consular assistance to the citizen until he is permitted

to return to Ireland.

*Question No. 452 answered with Question No. 413.*

### **Government Communications**

453. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the circumstances whereby his mobile phone was hacked; the information taken from the phone; the reports that were made to An Garda Síochána; the date on which they were made; the investigations that were conducted by An Garda Síochána or his Department in relation to the hacking; and the measures in place to minimise the chance of his phone being hacked again. [42596/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** In August 2020, I was subjected to a phishing attack via the “Telegram” messaging app on my mobile phone. Using credentials created on this platform, my identity was used to contact several foreign ministries.

The phone was taken out of use and a replacement issued. On the advice of my officials, the incident was reported to An Garda Síochána.

An Garda Síochána, in conjunction with the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), carried out a digital forensic investigation on the phone.

The risk of cyber-attacks and compromises in my Department is addressed through mandatory cyber security awareness training, technical controls and close liaison with the NCSC

### **Government Communications**

454. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the measures taken to ensure that his text messages used for official business are filed as part of the records management process as required by the decision of the Information Commissioner (details supplied). [42597/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** My Department is committed to a robust records management process and to the fulfilment of its obligations under the 1986 National Archives Act. As required by this Act, all records made or received in the course of the official business of the Department that are not subject to a disposal certificate are retained and then transferred to the National Archives at the 30 year mark, or the 20 year mark in the specific case of records relating to Northern Ireland. My Department has consistently completed the largest transfer of all Government Departments since the first intake of records in 1990.

The ICT revolution and new technologies over the last 35 years have ushered in transformation in the operations of business and Government, and records keeping policies internationally are evolving to address the substantial challenges. In Ireland, our National Archives Act is clear that it is the content and context of information, and not its format, that determines whether it is a record. Digital communications becoming the norm for Government work presents real practical difficulties for all Government Departments in terms of the retention, filing and storage of communications that could be of sufficient evidential value to constitute records.

There is also the important challenge of reconciling the various obligations of cybersecurity, Freedom of Information and Data Protection Acts. The latter Act rightly obliges us to retain no records containing personal data beyond the time required by their limited, lawful purpose.

My Department is currently undergoing a programme of change similar to other Departments as we are in the process of transforming records management practices and working to introduce a new modern system to meet the demands of our current work practices. These efforts are led by the OGCIO (Office of the Government Chief Information Officer) and include the roll-out of eDocs Records and Document Management platform. My Department will commence its migration to the eDocs platform next year.

In preparation for this, my Department initiated a comprehensive Records Management Reform Project in 2019. This will include an updated Retention Policy and Schedule based on the Guidelines issued by the National Archives in January of this year. It will also look at technical solutions for the efficient transfer and retention of records formed on new electronic technologies. We will incorporate these solutions and other innovations that came from our management response to the Covid-19 pandemic in our future ways of working.

*Question No. 455 answered with Question No. 415.*

### **Human Rights**

456. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps the Government has taken through its role on the UN Security Council and by other means to address the high volume of violence against Christians in Nigeria in 2021 given that an organisation (details supplied) has reported that 3,462 Christians have been hacked to death since 1 January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42643/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** I am deeply concerned by the ongoing violence in Nigeria. Conflict poses a serious challenge to that country's stability, and impact on the wider region.

The particular acts of violence referred to are between nomadic herders and settled farmers. While in Nigeria the vast majority of herders are Muslim and many of the farmers are Christian, conflict arises from differences of perspective regarding access to land. This is exacerbated by climate change and by rapid population growth in Africa's most populous country, which has increased strain on resources.

Resource conflict such as that between herders and farmers also complicates the ongoing efforts by the Nigerian authorities to contain the violence perpetrated by Boko Haram in Nigeria and the wider region. Ireland supports international efforts to reduce its influence and to strengthen the protection of civilians.

The Embassy of Ireland in Abuja actively monitors developments in Nigeria and advocates for the protection of human rights, including the free expression of thought, conscience and religion. Through the Irish Aid programme, Ireland provides humanitarian support those affected by conflict in Nigeria and the wider region. Ireland also provides funding to the Institute for Integrated Transitions, an NGO working in Nigeria, which has assisted in the establishment of an inter-ethnic and inter-religious committee on long term solutions to ethnic, religious, and resource based violence, including conflict between sedentary farmers and nomadic herders.

Ireland, bilaterally and as a Member State of the EU, works with the Nigerian authorities and with UN partners to promote peace and security in areas affected by armed groups and insecurity, including as an elected member of the UN Security Council.

As co-penholder on the Security Council file on the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), together with Niger, Ireland's key priority is to support and facilitate

UNOWAS in its work on conflict prevention and peacebuilding in West Africa and the Sahel, and promoting democracy and human rights in the region. In its most recent Presidential Statement on this matter, on 17 August 2021, the Security Council strongly condemned continued attacks against civilians in the region, and expressed the need for accountability for human rights violations and abuses. The Council also recognised the adverse effects of climate change on security and stability in the region, and the need for long-term strategies to support stabilisation and build resilience.

The Embassy of Ireland in Abuja continues to closely follow developments in Nigeria in cooperation with government authorities, civil society organisations, and our EU and UN partners. The Department of Foreign Affairs is committed to continuing to provide much needed support to strengthening peace and security in the region.

## Human Rights

457. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the actions the Government is taking in relation to human rights in North Korea given that Ireland is chairing the UN Security Council; if Ireland will call for the implementation of the recommendation from the 2014 UN Human Rights Council's report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (details supplied) that the UN Security Council should refer to the situation to the International Criminal Court; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42644/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Ireland has consistently raised the human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), both in the UN and through other international fora. In March 2021, Ireland made a national statement at the Human Rights Council, during an Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the DPRK, to raise serious concerns about human rights violations in the country.

Ireland urged the DPRK Government to take immediate steps to halt all human rights violations, to cooperate with the Special Rapporteur's mandate and to fully implement the human rights treaties to which they are party.

Ireland is fully aware of the recommendation regarding a possible referral to the International Criminal Court (ICC). We recently co-sponsored a resolution at the Human Rights Council welcoming General Assembly resolution 75/190, which encourages the Security Council to continue consideration of a referral and also condemns in the strongest terms the gross human rights violations committed by the DPRK.

In February, Ireland signed a joint letter to the President of the UN Security Council, requesting that the agenda item, 'The situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea' remain on the list of items of which the Council is seized. This provides a possibility to discuss the DPRK, including human rights issues, at Security Council level. Ireland joined others in repeating this request at a meeting of the Security Council on 25 August.

Ireland has consistently called on the DPRK to allow humanitarian access to address assistance needs, both at the Council and 1718 (DPRK) Sanctions Committee levels. Equally, Ireland has supported ongoing expedited humanitarian exemptions by the Committee.

*Question No. 458 answered with Question No. 406.*

459. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps being taken to facilitate remote working within his Department in particular to encourage remote working for those who live in the regions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42707/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Department of Foreign Affairs supports the aims of the National Remote Working Strategy and is committed to implementing a model of blended working that will provide flexibility to staff, while supporting the continued delivery of high quality services to Government and the Irish people.

While a formalised policy is currently under consideration and due for development by March 2022, it will align with the Blended Working Policy Framework for Civil Service organisations.

At present, and with the exception of the Passport Office, the majority of staff continue to work remotely in line with Government guidance. This has been achieved through the use of laptops, the majority of which were issued prior to the pandemic.

Coupled with this, the Department earlier this year approved the rollout of a Reimbursement for Home Working Equipment scheme. This scheme covers the costs associated with the purchase of a home office set-up subject to certain limits both at HQ and across our mission network and includes provision for a desk, chair, monitor, keyboard and mouse. Combined these actions have supported our staff to work remotely.

*Question No. 460 answered with Question No. 413.*

*Question No. 461 answered with Question No. 406.*

*Question No. 462 answered with Question No. 406.*

### **Flexible Work Practices**

463. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the way in which his Department and public bodies and agencies under his remit are accommodating requests for persons to work from home. [42757/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Department of Foreign Affairs supports the aims of the National Remote Working Strategy and is committed to implementing a model of blended working that will provide flexibility to staff, while supporting the continued delivery of high quality services to Government and the Irish people.

While a formalised policy is currently under consideration and due for development by March 2022, it will align with the Blended Working Policy Framework for Civil Service organisations.

At present, the majority of staff continue to work remotely in line with Government guidance. This has been achieved through the use of laptops, the majority of which were issued prior to the pandemic.

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*Question No. 464 answered with Question No. 406.*

*Question No. 465 answered with Question No. 406.*

## **United Nations**

466. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his aims and objectives for Ireland's Presidency of the United Nations Security Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42840/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Ireland holds the Presidency of the UN Security Council for the month of September 2021. In this role, we are chairing all meetings of the Council and are responsible for managing its agenda. I look forward to bringing Ireland's values and perspectives to this important task.

The Council Programme of Work for September includes meetings on a range of issues, including Afghanistan, Libya, Sudan, South Sudan, Syria, Yemen and the Middle East Peace Process. Developments in Afghanistan continue to be a high priority and I look forward to chairing a Council discussion on the situation on 9 September. We will also continue to closely monitor the situation in Ethiopia and Myanmar.

The Presidency provides an important opportunity to highlight a number of Ireland's priorities and we will convene three High Level signature meetings during our Presidency.

With over sixty years unbroken service, peacekeeping is a longstanding priority for Ireland. On 8 September, Ireland chaired an Open Debate of the Security Council on peacekeeping operations, with a specific focus on transitions from UN peace missions to a reconfigured UN presence designed to sustain peacebuilding gains. Work is underway on a Resolution on this issue, which we hope will be adopted during our Presidency.

The Taoiseach will chair a High-Level meeting on Climate and Security on 23 September, during the UN General Assembly High Level Week. The meeting will deepen substantive awareness of how climate security risks are relevant to the work of the Security Council, and explore what tangible actions can be taken.

Our third signature event will be a High-Level meeting on 27 September to mark the 25th Anniversary of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. The meeting will enable the Council to mark this important multilateral instrument as part of the global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation architecture.

Ireland will continue to prioritise the Women, Peace and Security agenda during our Presidency. We are working with Kenya and Mexico, who will hold the Presidency of the Council in October and November respectively, to mainstream the WPS Agenda during this period.

We will also continue our work to protect human rights, uphold International Humanitarian Law, and promote accountability for violations.

It is crucial that the Council hears the voices of those affected by its decisions. We will ensure the participation of civil society speakers in Council meetings during our Presidency, with a particular focus on women peacebuilders.

We will continue to work openly and constructively with all partners, as a solution-oriented member of the Council both during our Presidency and throughout our term on the Council.

*Question No. 467 answered with Question No. 450.*

### **Asylum Seekers**

468. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if Ireland is prepared to offer asylum to Afghan academics who are at threat from the Taliban; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42843/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Last month I announced, together with the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and the Minister of State for Law Reform, Youth Justice and Immigration, that places would be allocated to Afghan nationals under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP).

The IRPP was created in 2015 as part of Ireland's response to the migration crisis in central and southern Europe. It allows a predetermined number of people in need of international protection to be granted refugee status in Ireland. Places on the programme have been allocated to approximately 300 Afghans. Priority was given to those working on human rights issues, including the rights of women and girls, as well as those working with NGOs and European and international organisations.

We remain fully engaged with the situation in Afghanistan, both at UN level and at EU level, in particular focussing on the protection of the human rights of the Afghan people, and the humanitarian situation in that country. In response, Ireland has offered an additional €1 million in emergency aid to the UNHCR to support Afghan refugees and other host countries. We will continue to engage in the humanitarian response in Afghanistan at the upcoming High Level Ministerial Meeting on 13 September 2021, in Geneva.

### **Asylum Seekers**

469. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the Government is prepared to intervene to offer asylum to persons (details supplied) under direct threat from the Taliban; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42849/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Last month I announced, together with the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and the Minister of State for Law Reform, Youth Justice and Immigration, that places would be allocated to Afghan nationals under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP).

The IRPP was created in 2015 as part of Ireland's response to the migration crisis in central and southern Europe. It allows a predetermined number of people in need of international protection to be granted refugee status in Ireland. Places on the programme have been allocated to approximately 300 Afghans. Priority was given to those working on human rights issues, including the rights of women and girls, as well as those working with NGOs and European and international organisations.

We remain fully engaged with the situation in Afghanistan, both at UN level and at EU level, in particular focussing on the protection of the human rights of the Afghan people, and the humanitarian situation. In response, Ireland has offered an additional €1 million in emergency aid to the UNHCR to support Afghan refugees and other host countries. We will continue to engage in the humanitarian response in Afghanistan at the upcoming High Level Ministerial Meeting on 13 September 2021, in Geneva.

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In relation to the cases raised by the Deputy, I would ask that he send me on the full details, although I would emphasise that there are many more applications than places in the current programme.

*Question No. 470 answered with Question No. 413.*

### **Visa Applications**

471. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a matter regarding a holiday visa for a person (details supplied) will be addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42881/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** Officials at the Irish Embassy in question are aware of the case and have been in contact with the individual concerned.

As part of ongoing Government efforts to tackle the Covid-19, short stay visa applications were not accepted since 21 March 2020, unless the application meets certain emergency or priority criteria. Unfortunately, this particular case did not fall under the relevant criteria up to this point.

It was announced on 8 September 2021 that, with effect from 13 September 2021, all remaining restrictions on entry visa processing will be lifted and the processing of short stay entry visas will resume. This move is in line with the Government's next phase of response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

It should be noted that travellers arriving into Ireland must continue to comply with all public health measures. For travel from outside the EEA into Ireland, based on the current EU position, evidence of an approved vaccination or acceptable proof of recovery removes the requirement for any quarantine or on arrival testing. In the absence of that proof, evidence of a negative PCR test, self-quarantine and further testing will be required.

The applicant in this particular case may apply from 13 September 2021 for a short stay visa through the Embassy of Ireland under reference.

*Question No. 472 answered with Question No. 406.*

### **Government Communications**

473. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his Ministerial phones have been hacked or attempted to be hacked during the term of office. [42925/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** In August 2020, I was subjected to a phishing attack via the "Telegram" messaging app on my mobile phone. Using credentials created on this platform, my identity was used to contact several foreign ministries.

The phone was taken out of use, a replacement issued and on the advice of officials, the incident was reported to An Garda Síochána.

An Garda Síochána, in conjunction with the National Cyber Security Centre, carried out a digital forensic investigation on the phone.

*Questions - Written Answers*  
**Government Communications**

474. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has ever used his personal phones for Government business; and if so, if the personal phones have been hacked during his term of office. [42943/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I can confirm that I only use the official phone provided by my Department for Government business.

**Freedom of Information**

475. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of freedom of information requests responded to by his Department in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; the number of responses that included documents related to text messages and other phone message communications such as messages sent through an application (details supplied) in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42965/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The table below shows the total numbers of Freedom of Information requests responded to by my Department for the years listed.

Year	Number of FOI requests answered
2016	214
2017	262
2018	316
2019	364
2020	241
2021 to date	206

The FOI Act covers information contained in both physical and electronic formats. That would include text messages and other phone message communications, including the particular application specified in this request. With the expansion in available forms of electronic communication, we have seen a pattern of increasing interest in specific forms of phone message communication in the FOI requests that my Department receives. We expect that this trend will continue. While, my Department does not currently track the form of the records released under the Act, we have conducted a manual search through our FOI files and found 17 records in the form of text messages or other phone message communications. These formed part of the 111 records released yesterday under section 15 (1) (f), which comprised the largest ever set of records released by the Department.

*Question No. 476 answered with Question No. 404.*

**Consular Services**

477. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position generally regarding Irish embassies in non-EU countries assisting Irish citizens in their endeavour to receive a Covid-19 vaccine locally; the position in respect of the Irish embassy in Bangkok, Thailand in particular; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43021/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Government of Ireland

does not provide healthcare to Irish citizens residing outside the State. The Irish Embassy network globally has no role in the procurement of vaccines or the registration of Irish citizens for vaccinations abroad anywhere in the world. The roll-out of vaccinations in the Kingdom of Thailand is entirely a matter for the Government of Thailand.

The Embassy of Ireland in Bangkok, along with other like-minded nations, has made multiple representations to the Government of Thailand regarding the equitable provision of Covid-19 vaccines to all citizens, including Irish citizens resident in Thailand, on the basis of age, vulnerability and need.

On 1 August 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Thailand launched a dedicated on-line portal for foreign citizens resident in Thailand to register for vaccination (<https://expatvac.consular.go.th>). Individuals registering through this portal have been successfully included in vaccination roll-out. Thailand is now providing almost one million vaccine doses per day, and has secured supply for another 100 million doses during quarter four.

It should also be noted that following the successful rollout of the initial implementation phase of the EU Digital Covid Certificate in Ireland, the Government is creating a specific portal to enable Irish citizens vaccinated outside of the EU, with vaccines authorised for use in Ireland, to obtain a Covid certificate valid in Ireland and across the EU.

### **Government Communications**

478. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he and or his special advisors and or officials use or have used services (details supplied) to communicate in the past 18 months. [43072/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I confirm that I have not used the applications mentioned for official communications in the last 18 months, nor have my advisors.

A number of other officials across the Department use the Signal for IOS application on official phones in accordance with business needs. There is minimal use of the Slack for IOS application.

*Question No. 479 answered with Question No. 408.*

### **Fishing Industry**

480. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of negotiations with the British government to reinstate access for the Irish fishing fleet to the waters around Rockall. [43162/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I continue to work closely with my colleague, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, to resolve the current difficulties regarding access for our fishing fleets to the waters around Rockall.

Over the course of the past year, I have outlined Ireland's position in relation to Rockall and considered possible ways forward in contacts with both the UK and Scottish Governments.

Irish officials also remain in ongoing contact with the European Commission on all matters relating to the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement, including fisheries.

Following elections in Scotland earlier this year, I spoke with my Scottish counterpart, Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, Angus Robertson on 21 July on this matter. We also had a further opportunity to discuss Rockall at an in-person meeting in the margins of the British Irish Association conference in Oxford on 3 September. We agreed at this recent meeting to intensify efforts to identify a way forward. Irish and Scottish officials are in ongoing contact in follow-up.

Through the range of engagements set out, the Government is seeking to address the issues involved, reflecting longstanding fisheries patterns in the area.

The Government's position in relation to territorial claims on Rockall is consistent with longstanding Irish Government policy. Ireland has never made any claims to Rockall, which is a small uninhabitable granite rock located approximately 160 nautical miles west of the Scottish islands of St. Kilda and some 230 nautical miles to the north-west of Donegal. Nor has Ireland ever recognised British sovereignty claims over Rockall, and accordingly has not recognised a 12 nautical mile territorial sea around it either.

### **Northern Ireland**

481. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of negotiations with the British government on the jurisdiction of Lough Foyle; and if his attention has been drawn to the detrimental impact to the management of this key resource caused by the ongoing jurisdictional dispute over Lough Foyle which is still unresolved 23 years after the Good Friday Agreement. [43163/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The UK Government assertion of jurisdiction over the whole of Lough Foyle has never been accepted by Ireland and this position remains unchanged.

Following discussions in 2011 between the then Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and the British Foreign Secretary, the British and Irish Governments agreed to seek to resolve jurisdictional issues relating to both Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough.

Since that time, a series of meetings and contacts have taken place at official level between the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and my own Department. This engagement is ongoing and my Department is also continuing to consult with other relevant Departments on specific issues and concerns in relation to licensing of aquaculture in Lough Foyle.

The issues involved in these discussions are complex and involve a range of different actors, including the Crown Estates on the UK side, but the Government is satisfied that all sides are committed to reaching a positive resolution as soon as possible.

### **Defence Forces**

482. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence the estimated cost of retaining the 700 members of the Defence Forces on post-1994 contracts scheduled to retire in 2022; if a scheme has been introduced by him in order to allow them to remain in service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41472/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Military life places unique demands on individuals and it is necessary that Defence Forces personnel are prepared to meet the challenges of all military operations. To this end, it is vital that the age and health profile of personnel

be such as to ensure that operational capability and effectiveness are not compromised in any way. For this reason compulsory retirement ages for ranks in the Permanent Defence Force are considerably lower than in other employments.

I am advised by the military authorities that based on current data the number of Privates and Corporals in receipt of Technical Pay Group 2 or less, who enlisted post 1994 and who will be due to be mandatorily retired by the end of December 2022 is 195. The number of personnel estimated as due to retire in any year can change due to a variety of circumstances including: voluntary retirement, medical retirements before mandatory retirement age, deaths in service, promotion to Senior NCO ranks which have higher mandatory retirement ages, etc.

A review of contracts of service of personnel enlisted post 1 January 1994, is currently underway. The Review is considering appropriate mandatory retirement age limits for Privates, Corporals and Sergeants, as well as senior NCOs. Proposals and recommendations arising from these deliberations will be discussed with PDFORRA on completion of the Review.

### **Departmental Staff**

483. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Defence the current policy regarding the employment of persons with disabilities in his Department and in each State and semi-State body under the aegis of his Department; the disability quota of his Department at present; if there is an active campaign to increase the disability workforce from the current target of 3% to a minimum of 6% by 2024; if this quota has now been exceeded; if so, the details of same; if there has been an advertised competition in relation to the quota; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41589/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** In accordance with the Disability Act 2005, statistics on the number of employees within my Department who have declared a disability are compiled and submitted to the National Disability Authority annually. The figures are compiled retrospectively during the first quarter of each year in respect of the previous year and therefore, the figures for 2021 are not available currently. In 2020, 4.28% of civil servants and 6.15% of civilian employees had declared a disability. It should be noted that there is no onus on an employee to declare a disability.

The only State body currently under the aegis of my Department is the Army Pensions Board which is an independent statutory body, established under the Army Pensions Act 1927 and consisting of a chairman and two ordinary members. The Secretary to the Board is provided from the staff of my Department.

In compliance with Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005, the Department of Defence has undertaken, where practicable, to promote and support the employment of people with disabilities. The Department continues to operate in a non-discriminatory environment in accordance with the Equality Acts and aims to ensure that the principles of employment equality are implemented in recruitment, promotion, training and work experience.

Recruitment, which for civil servants of my Department is undertaken by the Public Appointments Service, is open to all applicants and reasonable accommodation is afforded to those employees with a declared disability.

The Deputy will be aware that under the provisions of Section 46(3) of the Disability Act, Part 5, 'Public Service Employment' does not apply to members of the Defence Forces, the Garda Síochána or Prison Officers. This reflects the provisions of the section 37(5) of the Employment Equality Acts 1998 to 2015, which provide that matters relating to discrimination

on the basis of age or disability do not apply to employment in the Defence Forces given the unique requirements for employment in the Defence Forces.

### **Electoral Process**

484. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Defence the process of getting postal ballots to serving and retired members of the Defence Forces to ensure they are received and returned in time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41937/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Defence Forces place a very high level of importance on ensuring that all Permanent Defence Force (PDF) personnel are provided with the opportunity to register for, and to receive, a postal vote. To that end, personnel are provided with access to registration forms, through the chain of command. Defence Forces personnel who wish to exercise their right to vote are required to complete a Form RFC annually, to ensure their inclusion on the Postal Voters List. A significant operation then takes place to ensure that those who are registered to vote, at home or overseas, are provided with postal votes, to enable them to exercise their right to vote.

The Department of Defence provides a link between the Franchise Section of the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (D/HPCLG) and the military authorities. This is to ensure that appropriate timelines for postal voting are agreed. Responsibility for the distribution of postal votes rests with the military authorities.

On receipt of official notification from the D/HPCLG that an election or referendum has been called, the military authorities inform the GOCs and the Flag Officer Commanding the Naval Service of the pending election. Orders are sent to overseas units indicating that a courier will be dispatched with ballot papers.

Officers are appointed to collect ballot papers for the various Formations from various post offices. Close liaison is maintained with the Returning Officers from the D/HPCLG regarding dates and timings of collections. On receipt of ballot papers for their personnel, commanding officers check the papers against the nominal roll of personnel who completed their Form RFC. Ballot papers are distributed without delay to personnel concerned.

The responsibility for returning the vote by post rests with the individual except in the case of personnel overseas, for whom the military authorities arrange for the votes to be returned. This involves the deployment of courier personnel to overseas missions to enable personnel deployed abroad to exercise their vote.

On retiring or discharging from service, a member of the PDF is removed from the Defence Forces Postal Voters List and the appropriate civilian registration authority is informed to enable the individual to be transferred to the Register of Electors. If a postal ballot is identified by the Defence Forces as being in respect of an individual who has retired or discharged since the Register of Electors was published, then that postal ballot is forwarded to their last known home address.

I am assured that the Defence Forces places the highest priority on the thorough, diligent and timely administration of Postal Votes, and will continue to work with both the Local Authorities and the D/HPCLG to ensure that the system operates as efficiently as possible.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

485. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Defence the measures he is taking to promote or facilitate remote working for staff in his Department or bodies under the aegis of his Department; the costs this has generated in terms of the provision of laptops, desktop computers or contributions to wi-fi costs or phone-related expenses; the number of staff who have applied for permission to work from home on a permanent or hybrid-model basis (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41948/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Departments and Offices are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, my Department, in line with other civil and public service organisations, has adhered to public health advice and to the Guidance for Public Service Employers published by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. This has meant employees working from home, but also attending the workplace to carry out essential work that cannot be discharged from home.

A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department or Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas. Once the framework is finalised, my Department will develop a policy, appropriate to the business needs of the organisation. An assessment of all elements of such an approach will be undertaken as part of that process.

### **Pension Provisions**

486. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Defence if consideration will be given to making the Military Service Allowance pensionable for pre-1990 pensioners in view of the fact that arising from a recommendation made in 1990 by the Gleeson Commission the allowance was made pensionable in the case of personnel retiring on or after 1 August 1990, but was not made pensionable for those who retired before that despite the fact it had been introduced in 1979 in lieu of a pay increase. [42612/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Military Service Allowance (MSA) was first introduced in 1979 to compensate Defence Forces personnel for the special disadvantages associated with military life. Arising from a recommendation made in 1990 by the *Commission on Remuneration and Conditions of Service in the Defence Forces* (the Gleeson Commission), MSA was made pensionable in the case of personnel retiring on or after 1 August 1990. This approach was fully consistent with settled public service pensions policy which provides that the benefit of an allowance being made pensionable for serving personnel does not extend to existing pensioners.

The Final Report of the *Commission on Public Service Pensions* was published in January 2001 and was considered and broadly accepted by the Government. This Report was the first comprehensive examination of public service occupational pension arrangements since the foundation of the State. The Commission was an independent body and had invited submissions from interested parties, giving those concerned an unprecedented opportunity to put their case on occupational pension issues. I understand that groups representative of military pensioners were among those who made submissions and were met by the Commission.

In its Report, the Commission specifically addressed the issue of the pensionability of allowances (including the MSA) and the consequences for public service pensioners generally. However, having considered the arguments advanced by the groups affected, together with

longstanding public service pensions policy in that context and the substantial cost implications involved, the Commission did not recommend any increase for the pensioners concerned. Aside from pre-August 1990 Defence Forces pensioners, the other groups affected include certain retired members of An Garda Síochána and the Prison Service and retired teachers. In the context of the Government's subsequent consideration of the Commission's Report, no change in existing policy on this matter has been authorised or is contemplated.

### **Defence Forces**

487. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Defence if he is considering increase the maximum age for recruitment to the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42617/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The age limits for personnel wishing to enter the Defence Forces are as set out in Regulations made pursuant to the Defence Act 1954, as amended. There are currently no plans to change these age limits.

An independently chaired review, which has examined recruitment practices and procedures, including entry criteria, in the Defence Forces, has now concluded and I expect the final report imminently. Any recommendations that may arise from this report will be considered and progressed as appropriate.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

488. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Defence the steps being taken to facilitate remote working within his Department in particular to encourage remote working for those who live in the regions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42702/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Departments and Offices are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, my Department, in line with other civil and public service organisations, has adhered to public health advice and to the Guidance for Public Service Employers published by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. This has meant employees working from home, but also attending the workplace to carry out essential work that cannot be discharged from home.

A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department or Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas. Once the framework is finalised, my Department will develop a policy, appropriate to the business needs of the organisation. An assessment of all elements of such an approach will be undertaken as part of that process. As my Department is headquartered outside Dublin, this assessment will address employees within regions outside Dublin.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

489. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Defence the way in which his Department and public bodies and agencies under his remit are accommodating requests for persons to work from home. [42752/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Departments and Offices are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, my Department, in line with other civil and public service organisations, has adhered to public health advice and to the Guidance for Public Service Employers published by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. This has meant employees working from home, but also attending the workplace to carry out essential work that cannot be discharged from home.

A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department or Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas. Once the framework is finalised, my Department will develop a policy, appropriate to the business needs of the organisation. An assessment of all elements of such an approach will be undertaken as part of that process.

The only State body under the aegis of my Department is the Army Pensions Board. The only staff post is the secretary to the Board, which is provided from the staff of the Department.

### Freedom of Information

490. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Defence the number of freedom of information requests responded to by his Department in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; the number of responses that included documents related to text messages and other phone message communications such as messages sent through an application (details supplied) in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42960/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The number of freedom of information requests responded to by my Department in each of the years 2016 to 2021 are set out in the table below.

-	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
No. of FOI requests received	120	155	140	166	104	107*
Those that included documents related to text messages, etc.	-	-	-	4	2	3

\*2021 figures are to 8 September, 2021.

### Commissions of Investigation

491. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Defence the cost of each commission of investigation under the remit of his Department over the preceding decade. [42989/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** My Department has not incurred any expenditure on a commission of investigation in the past decade.

### Ministerial Appointments

492. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Defence the number of formal and informal roles held by a person (details supplied) in the name of his Department or associated agency in the lifetime of this Government; when they were appointed to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43034/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** There have been no formal or informal roles held by the person to whom the Deputy referred, in the name of my Department or associated agency in the lifetime of this Government.

### **Government Communications**

493. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Defence if he and or his special advisors and or officials use or have used services (details supplied) to communicate in the past 18 months. [43067/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I can confirm that neither my special advisors nor I have used the services specified to communicate in the past 18 months. The services specified are not approved for official communication in my Department.

### **Departmental Funding**

494. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Education the most appropriate avenue through which an organisation (details supplied) can apply for potential funding streams within her Department; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43165/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The centre referred to by the Deputy is not a recognised school, but provides education for young people outside of the mainstream school setting .

While my Department primarily supports recognised schools, my Department does provide funding for a small number of alternative settings which provide education for the small number of young people who do not complete mainstream education.

My Department fully appreciates and acknowledges the very valuable work which is being undertaken in the centre referred to by the Deputy.

My Department has had extensive engagement with the centre over recent months and will continue to engage in the context of alternative education provision. The organisation receives funding from my Department and also from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science via Cork Education and Training Board.

My Department has committed to a review of out of school settings and this review will inform future policy in this area.

### **Schools Building Projects**

495. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Education the position regarding the temporary site for a new secondary school (details supplied) in County Cork. [41437/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The school to which the Deputy refers opened in suitable interim accommodation in the former Film Centre Building in Ballincollig.

A planning application is being prepared for future interim accommodation for the school on the Ballincollig GAA site.

### **Education and Training Provision**

496. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education if an application for a laptop for a child with learning difficulties will be granted for a person (details supplied) in County Kerry before the beginning of the new academic year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41453/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) through its network of local Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs), is responsible for processing applications from schools for special educational needs supports, including applications for assistive technology.

SENOs then make recommendations to my Department where assistive technology is required. The NCSE operates within my Department's criteria in making recommendations for support, as set out in Circular 0010/2013 which is published on my Department's website: [www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0010\\_2013.pdf](http://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0010_2013.pdf)

In order to qualify for equipment under the assistive technology scheme, a child must have been diagnosed with a physical or communicative disability and must also have a recommendation in a professional assessment that the equipment is essential in order to allow the child to access the curriculum. It must also be clear that the existing I.T. equipment in the school is insufficient to meet the child's needs.

The application referred to by the Deputy was reviewed, with consideration given to the documentation provided, the criteria set out in Circular 0010/2013 and the Special Education Needs Organiser's observations and recommendations.

I am pleased to say that the application was approved for funding and the school was informed on 7th September 2021.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

497. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education the basis on which a company (details supplied) is reclassifying teachers previously deemed to be very-high-risk to high-risk; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41564/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** In February this year, my Department requested that medical specialists thoroughly assess and recommend guidelines for 'Very High Risk' and also pregnant employees working in the education sector. The most recent guidance for the education sector was published by the HSE in July 2021 and authored by the Civil Service Chief Medical Officer, Institute of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Public Health Medicine in HSE and Medmark Occupational Healthcare.

As with all other guidelines around public health measures, my Department has been led by expert medical advice provided by the Government through the HSE and other relevant public bodies. The HSE Guidance for the education sector published in July 2021 represents the latest available advice.

On 30th June, 2021, where the Occupational Health Service (OHS) i.e. Medmark catego-

rised a teacher or SNA as ‘Very High Risk’ at any time before or during the 2020/21 school year, their ‘COVID-19 Health Risk Categorisation Report’ expired on that date. For the 2021/22 school year, having considered the HSE advice, the HSE Guidance for the education sector and information available on the OHS website, a teacher or SNA who believes they are at very high risk of serious illness from contracting COVID-19, must complete the online OHS COVID-19 Risk Assessment Questionnaire and submit it to the OHS.

The COVID-19 health risk categorisation assessments are performed by a team of qualified and experienced specialists in occupational medicine. Available medical evidence, including reports from treating consultants as well as vaccination status of employees, are considered during the OHS COVID-19 health risk categorisation assessment process.

A teacher or SNA who has been categorised by the OHS and considers that the OHS ‘COVID-19 Health Risk Categorisation Report’ places them in an incorrect risk category, may request a review. The OHS will re-evaluate the medical evidence provided. The teacher or SNA may provide additional medical evidence as part of the review process. In a situation where the review outcome is that the COVID-19 health risk categorisation remains the same, a further review will only be undertaken, where additional medical evidence indicates there has been a change in the teacher or SNA’s medical status or where there is a change in the HSE guidelines for the ‘high risk’ group.

As knowledge of COVID-19 has increased, some medical conditions that previously placed a teacher or SNA in the ‘High Risk’ group now places them in the ‘Normal Risk’ group. A teacher or SNA in the ‘High Risk’ or Normal Risk’ group can attend the workplace where the school is implementing the COVID-19 Response Plan and the public health advice for schools. Where a teacher or SNA has been categorised as ‘Very High Risk’ by the OHS, they will be facilitated to work from home.

The COVID-19 Response Plan is designed to support employers and employees in putting measures in place that aim to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the school environment. It details the policies and practices necessary for a school to implement the Government’s ‘Work Safely Protocol’, so as to prevent the introduction and spread of COVID-19 in the school environment. All employers are required to have an up to date COVID-19 Response Plan in place. The plan outlines the arrangements in place to ensure a safe workplace for all employees. There is an obligation on the employer to discuss the school’s COVID-19 Response Plan with employees and ensure that all appropriate risk mitigation measures are clearly in place for their protection.

My Department’s Circular Letter 0042/2021 details the current working arrangements and leave arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic for teachers and SNAs employed in recognised primary and post primary schools.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

498. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education her views on whether it would have been more advisable to delay the reclassification of teachers from very-high-risk to high-risk in mid-July 2021, given the particular virulence of the delta variant and that much is still unknown about its impact on individual health and on the community; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41565/21]

499. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education the systems that are in place to facilitate working from home for previous very-high-risk teachers who have now been down-

graded to high-risk teachers given their susceptibility to breakthrough infection even when vaccinated; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41566/21]

500. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education the way her Department interprets HSE advice (details supplied) vis-à-vis vaccinated high-risk teachers given the medical concerns in relation to children and the delta variant; the particular arrangements that are in place to assist and protect these teachers in such circumstances; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41567/21]

501. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education the safety measures that have been or will be put in place in the classroom to protect pregnant teachers and SNAs given the danger of the virus to pregnant women and the increased transmissibility of the delta variant; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41568/21]

508. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education the position regarding schools reopening (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41666/21]

511. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Education the arrangements in place allowing pregnant teachers who are not considered in a high risk to continue to work from home; if her Department is engaging with teachers and their unions on this matter; if her Department will consider additional supports to protect pregnant teachers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41673/21]

515. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if she will allow more transparency regarding workplace assessments for high-risk and pregnant staff; and if provisions will be made for these assessments to be completed locally in schools prior to their return given that there have been many appeals of the decisions made by a company (details supplied) that carried out these assessments. [41798/21]

516. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if her Department will allow more transparency regarding workplace assessments for high risk and pregnant staff; if she make provisions for these assessments to be completed locally in schools prior to their return given that there has been many appeals of the decisions made by a company (details supplied) who carried out these assessments changing the status of teachers who had previously been considered very high risk to high risk and have refused appeals submitted offering vague explanations for the change in status. [41814/21]

518. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education her views on matters raised in correspondence (details supplied) in respect of the Covid-19 risk for pregnant SNAs and teachers returning to work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41835/21]

526. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Education the measures she will take to protect women in early pregnancy who cannot receive a Covid-19 vaccine in workplaces that involve being exposed to large numbers of persons such as teaching; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41986/21]

527. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Education if she will take measures to safeguard the health and safety of teachers who are in early pregnancy and cannot avail of a Covid-19 vaccine yet will be in classrooms with large numbers of unvaccinated persons; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41987/21]

531. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education if her Department will publish the scientific opinion and research which shows it is safe for pregnant teachers and SNAs to return to the classroom in the context of the particular risk of Covid-19 to pregnant women (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42012/21]

532. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education if her Department is examining the possibility of pregnant teachers working from home for as long as possible given that the children they are teaching will be largely unvaccinated and the women themselves at higher risk of complication, ICU admission and stillbirth if they contract the virus though vaccinated themselves; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42013/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 498, 499, 500, 501, 508, 511, 515, 516, 518, 526, 527, 531 and 532 together.

The Government's 'Work Safely Protocol' published on 14th May, 2021 incorporates the current advice on Public Health measures and sets out the procedures required in workplaces to prevent the spread of COVID-19. All employers are required to have an up to date COVID-19 Response Plan in place. The COVID-19 Response Plan details the policies and practices necessary for a school to implement the Government's 'Work Safely Protocol', so as to prevent the introduction and spread of COVID-19 in the school environment. The plan outlines the arrangements in place to ensure a safe workplace for all employees. There is an obligation on the employer to discuss the school's COVID-19 Response Plan with employees and ensure that all appropriate risk mitigation measures are clearly in place for their protection. The employer has obligations under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act, 2005 to ensure the safety and welfare of staff at work. It is the duty of the employer to carry out a risk assessment to meet these obligations, including workplace pregnancy risk assessments. The employer should also review existing risk assessments to consider any new risks that arise due to the school's COVID-19 Response Plan.

The evidence available from the operation of schools during COVID-19 to date, shows that schools are low risk environments due to the infection prevention and control measures in place. My Department has been guided by Public Health as to the mitigation measures needed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in our schools. Public Health has stated that the new variants of the disease do not change the infection prevention and control measures required in schools. The aim of all of the COVID-19 infection prevention and control measures that have been put in place for schools is to support schools to operate safely and prevent the introduction of COVID-19 and also the onward transmission of COVID-19 among the school community. These measures protect pupils, their parents and school staff and are very effective when adhered to. The provision of CO2 monitors for every school will also be an important tool in keeping our schools safe and in addition to the mitigation measures already in place, our staff and students can be confident of returning to safe environments in our schools. As has been the case throughout the pandemic, the reopening of schools for the 2021/22 school year, will be carried out in close consultation with Public Health and the Education Partners.

In February this year, my Department requested that medical specialists thoroughly assess and recommend guidelines for 'Very High Risk' and also pregnant employees working in the education sector. At that time, my Department took a precautionary approach and instructed pregnant teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) to work from home, pending the outcome of this review. The most recent guidance for the education sector was published by the HSE in July 2021 and authored by the Civil Service Chief Medical Officer, Institute of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Public Health Medicine in HSE and Medmark Occupational Healthcare.

In the particular case of advice around pregnant employees, this advice was prepared in consultation with the Institute of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, the national professional and training body for Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Ireland, as well as other medical and public health professionals.

The HSE guidance for the education sector confirm that pregnant teachers and SNAs can

safely attend the workplace in school where all the infection prevention and control measures are in place by implementation of the School COVID-19 Response Plan. This is the case whether or not the pregnant teacher or SNA has been vaccinated. However, all pregnant teachers and SNAs should apply to the Occupational Health Service (OHS) before the end of their first trimester, so that their individual medical circumstances can be assessed in the context of COVID-19. Those with underlying medical conditions may be categorised as ‘Very High Risk’ and be facilitated to work remotely i.e. work from home. For a pregnant teacher or SNA, from 14 weeks gestation and categorised as ‘High Risk’ by the OHS who works in a special education setting, she may in certain circumstances be exposed to a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 and may be facilitated to work outside of the special education classroom.

It is of course open to a pregnant teacher or SNA to discuss their individual medical concerns with their own medical team. Where their treating consultant has concerns over their fitness to work due to a pregnancy-related illness, then the terms and conditions of the Sick Leave Scheme (pregnancy related illness provisions) may apply, outside of the very specific COVID-19 health risk categorisation assessment by the OHS referred to above.

The COVID-19 health risk categorisation assessments are performed by a team of qualified and experienced specialists in occupational medicine. Available medical evidence, including reports from treating consultants as well as vaccination status of employees, are considered during the OHS COVID-19 health risk categorisation assessment process.

My Department’s Circular Letter 0042/2021 details the current working arrangements and leave arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic for teachers and SNAs employed in recognised primary and post primary schools.

*Question No. 499 answered with Question No. 498.*

*Question No. 500 answered with Question No. 498.*

*Question No. 501 answered with Question No. 498.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

502. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education the number of CO2 monitors that have been delivered to schools and or will be delivered in time for the new term; the number that have been ordered; the locations from which the monitors have been ordered; the cost of same; the scientific basis on which the number granted to each school are calculated; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41569/21]

503. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education the systems in place to ensure each school receives the CO2 monitors it needs automatically; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41570/21]

504. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education if each school in the State will get a delivery and installation of CO2 monitors sufficient to their need; if not, the reason; the discussions she has had with schools in relation to same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41571/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 502 to 504, inclusive, together.

Managing ventilation is just one of a suite of public health measures in place to keep our

schools safe.

My Department updated its guidance for schools on Practical Steps for the Deployment of Good Ventilation Practices in Schools. This was done at the end of May and followed on from work done centrally by an expert group that was looking at the role of ventilation in managing Covid-19.

A copy of the guidance is published at [www.gov.ie/en/publication/ad236-guidance-on-ventilation-in-schools/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ad236-guidance-on-ventilation-in-schools/).

The over-arching approach in the guidance is for schools to have windows open as fully as possible when classrooms are not in use (e.g. during break-times or lunch-times and also at the end of each school day) and partially open when classrooms are in use.

The importance of good ventilation is an important aspect of public health advice on managing Covid-19 risks and this led to the establishment of an Expert Group by the Department of Health.

A sub-group of the main Expert Group focussed exclusively on the issue of improving and monitoring ventilation in schools. This report formed the basis for the most recent updating of the ventilation guidance for schools and included recommendations in relation to strengthening the message about the importance of good ventilation, the use of CO2 monitors and, where considered necessary, air cleaners.

The use of CO2 monitors can provide a useful general indication that areas/rooms within a building may not be adequately ventilated and can enable occupants to become familiar with the impact that activities, outdoor weather and window openings have on levels of good ventilation within a room. This information can be used to inform strategies for improving ventilation and in that regard my Department has funded the provision of over 35,000 portable CO2 monitors for schools at an estimated overall cost of circa €4 million. The portable units can facilitate measurements in a wide range of locations in schools.

Deliveries of CO2 monitors to schools commenced in the third week of August and are expected to be completed by mid-September. In total, it involves over 35,000 CO2 monitors being distributed to schools in either one or two deliveries over a four-week period.

*Question No. 503 answered with Question No. 502.*

*Question No. 504 answered with Question No. 502.*

### Third Level Education

505. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Education the transition rates from post-primary to higher education in each year since 2011, by DEIS and non-DEIS schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41574/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The transition rates from post-primary to higher education by DEIS/non-DEIS school status are available for years 2015-2018. The data is presented in table below.

-	2015	2016	2017	2018
Transition rates from post-primary to higher education	64.0%	64.4%	63.6%	63.4%
Transition rates from post-primary to higher education (DEIS pupils only)	42.1%	42.1%	41.8%	40.5%
Transition rates from post-primary to higher education (non-DEIS pupils only)	70.0%	70.4%	69.1%	69.4%

For additional information please see the 1) series of third level projections reports published on DoE Statistics web page: [www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/projections/](http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/projections/), and 2) the latest Education Indicators report: [www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Key-Statistics/education-indicators-for-ireland-2020.pdf](http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Key-Statistics/education-indicators-for-ireland-2020.pdf).

### Education and Training Provision

506. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Education the transition rates from post-primary to further education and training in each year since 2011, by DEIS and non-DEIS schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41575/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Please find attached requested figures for Transition Rates from Post Primary to FET for the years 2015-2019, 2019 being the latest year data is available for.

Transitions to Further Education & Training 2015-2019	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Transition rates from post-primary to FET	26.3%	27.3%	26.3%	25.9%	24.2%
Transition rates from post-primary to FET (DEIS Schools)	37.3%	38.9%	36.9%	35.4%	33.4%
Transition rates from post-primary to FET (non-DEIS Schools)	23.5%	24.4%	23.7%	23.4%	21.8%

Note: The transition rate from post-primary to Further Education and Training, (FET), in a given year is a measure of the percentage of pupils from the previous five academic years who ultimately entered FET in that year.

Data is taken from the most recent Education Indicators for Ireland report, published December 2020, which is available on the Department's website, link below;

[www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Key-Statistics/education-indicators-for-ireland-2020.pdf](http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Key-Statistics/education-indicators-for-ireland-2020.pdf).

Please note that individualised records were not available prior to 2015 so it is not possible to provide transition rates for previous years.

### Departmental Staff

507. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Education the current policy regarding the employment of persons with disabilities in her Department and in each State and semi-State body under the aegis of her Department; the disability quota of her Department at present; if there is an active campaign to increase the disability workforce from the current target of 3% to a minimum of 6% by 2024; if this quota has now been exceeded; if so, the details of same; if there has been an advertised competition in relation to the quota; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41590/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Part V of the Disability Act 2005 requires that public bodies promote and support the employment of people with disabilities and ensure that 3% of staff employed by them are people with disabilities. The requirement applies to the Department of Education and certain of its aegis bodies.

The Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities for 2015 – 2024, commits the Government to progressively increasing the statutory target for the employment of people with disabilities from 3% to a minimum of 6% in the public sector by 2024.

In 2020, the reported percentage of employees with a disability under the definition of the

Disability Act 2005 for the overall Department of Education was 3.58%.

While the assistance of the Public Appointments Service is sought for the majority of recruitments in my Department, my Department is committed to supporting staff members with disabilities by providing reasonable accommodation where required.

*Question No. 508 answered with Question No. 498.*

### **Rights of People with Disabilities**

509. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the fact that there are several pieces of legislation which have not been fully implemented in relation to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities meaning that persons with Down syndrome do not have the necessary mechanisms to access their rights, for example, their right to inclusive education and equality before the law; her plans to ensure Ireland honours its commitments (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41668/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I am aware of the requirements of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the current legislation which supports the rights of children with disabilities to receive an education.

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

The Education for Persons with Special Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 sets out the vision for the education of children with disabilities in this country. A child with special educational needs should be educated in an inclusive environment alongside their peers unless the nature and extent of those needs would not be in the best interest of the child concerned or the other children with whom the child is to be educated. For this purpose, my Departments funds a continuum of education provision which covers the full spectrum of need ranging from placement in a mainstream class with supports or a placement in a more specialist setting, a special class or special school. My Department currently spends in excess of €2b in supporting this continuum annually.

I wish to advise the Deputy that a number of sections of the Education for Persons with Special Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 have been commenced.

The commenced provisions include those establishing the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and those providing for an inclusive approach to the education of children with special educational needs.

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

Section 1 – Interpretation

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

Section 14 – placing certain duties on schools

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

Section 39 - placing certain duties on Health Boards

Sections 40 to 53 - amending the Education Act

Schedule 1 – providing for meetings and membership of the Council

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

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

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

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

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

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

I have also indicated that one of my priorities as Minister for Special Education and Inclusion is to carry out a review of the EPSEN Act.

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

Policy advice has been requested from the NCSE on the implications of the UNCRPD and this is expected in the coming months.

### **Schools Building Projects**

510. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education the status of a building further to the building of a new school (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41669/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Deputy will be aware that a project to provide a new school building for the school in question is included in the Department's school building programme to be delivered as part of the National Development Plan.

The existing school building is not in the Department's ownership and the future use of the property would be a matter for the property owner.

*Question No. 511 answered with Question No. 498.*

### **Special Educational Needs**

512. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education the reason there is no panel for SNA substitute teachers given that it is the process deemed necessary for mainstream substitute teachers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41700/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** There are no plans to introduce a panel or central database of substitute SNAs to replace SNAs that are off work.

The recruitment and appointment of special needs assistants (SNAs) is a matter for the individual school authority. Department's Circulars 0026/2021 and 0051/2019 sets out the current minimum educational requirements for appointment as a Special Needs Assistant. When advertising for vacancies schools can create an internal panel of suitable applicants from which future vacancies including cover SNA vacancies may be filled valid for the duration of the school year.

### **School Curriculum**

513. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Education her plans to introduce mental health and resilience modules in secondary education; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41720/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department has an important role to play in supporting the wellbeing and mental health of our young people. My Department's Wellbeing Policy and Framework for practice has given recognition to the importance of promoting wellbeing in education. It outlines a comprehensive, whole-school approach to the promotion of wellbeing and positive mental health. It focuses on the whole school community, as well as groups and individual young people with identified needs.

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) of my Department provides a comprehensive, school-based psychological service to all primary and post primary schools through the application of psychological theory and practice to support the wellbeing, academic, social and emotional development of all learners. NEPS also provides training to schools in programmes to reduce anxiety and promote coping and resilience in children and young people.

The curriculum plays an important role in teaching students about managing their wellbeing. All students commencing Junior Cycle from September 2017 onwards undertake the area of learning called Wellbeing. Wellbeing crosses the three years of Junior Cycle and builds on substantial work already taking place in schools in support of students' wellbeing. When planning a Wellbeing Programme schools should consider the NCCA developed short courses in PE, SPHE, and CSPE.

In Junior Cycle, six indicators—Active, Responsible, Connected, Resilient, Respected and Aware— have been identified as central to students' wellbeing. Learning in SPHE provides learning opportunities designed to enhance each of these indicators thereby contributing significantly to the school's Wellbeing programme in Junior Cycle.

In particular the SPHE short course Strand 4: My Mental Health focuses on building posi-

tive mental health, examining young people's experience of mental ill health and learning how to support themselves and others in challenging times. These are the result of widespread consultation with education partners to ensure that the courses address important, relevant and meaningful learning for young people in these subjects. Wellbeing is one of the principles that underpins Junior Cycle education and is reflected in a number of the statements of learning that are central to planning for the student's experience of and the evaluation of the school's Junior Cycle programme.

### **State Examinations**

514. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education her views on correspondence (details supplied) regarding the leaving certificate in 2022; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41731/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I am conscious that students who are due to take their Leaving Certificate examinations in 2022 have experienced a degree of disruption to their learning.

On 30 June, the Advisory Group on Planning for State Examinations received an update in relation to the 2022 Leaving Certificate and Junior Cycle examinations. Following this, I announced that adjustments would be made to the 2022 examinations which are similar to those published in December 2020 in respect of Leaving Certificate 2021.

The adjustments are outlined in Assessment Arrangements for Junior and Leaving Certificate 2022, which is available on [www.gov.ie/leavingcertificate](http://www.gov.ie/leavingcertificate).

These adjustments will leave intact the familiar overall structure of the examinations, while incorporating additional choice for students in the examinations.

The adjustments provide greater choice for candidates across a wide range of subjects. For example, in Leaving Certificate Biology, candidates in 2022 will be required to answer five out of seven short questions in Section A, whereas previously five out of six such questions had to be answered.

In a smaller number of subjects, e.g. Leaving Certificate Mathematics, Technology and Computer Science, candidates will be required to answer a reduced number of questions on the paper, but no change will be made to the examination duration.

A summary advice note setting out the key curriculum and assessment arrangements for Leaving Certificate Applied Year 1 and Year 2 students in the 2021/22 school year has also been published and is also available on [www.gov.ie/leavingcertificate](http://www.gov.ie/leavingcertificate).

The system of Calculated Grades which operated for Leaving Certificate 2020 was intended to be a once-off event in 2020 given the sudden and very challenging position at that time and the impossibility of running examinations in their traditional form safely.

A decision was made by Government in February 2021 to offer a system of Accredited Grades to this year's Leaving Certificate students. The rationale for this was that, given the levels of disruption to learning experienced by current Leaving Certificate students during two significant and prolonged periods during their Senior Cycle education, it would have been unfair and unjust to require such students to sit traditional Leaving Certificate Examinations without offering an alternative or parallel process.

While schools were closed as a result of Covid-19 from January 2021, a programme of remote learning was provided to all students. Students who were in fifth year were also prioritised for a return to school following the return of sixth year students.

It is hoped that incoming sixth year students will be able to complete a full year of in-school tuition when they return to school at the start of the 2021/22 school year, and will experience no further disruption to their learning as a result of Covid-19.

It was also announced, on 30 June that the State Examinations Commission (SEC) will run an alternative set of Leaving Certificate Examinations in 2022, shortly following the main set of examinations. The SEC will set out the eligibility conditions for these examinations, which will be limited to certain students who are unable to sit the main set of examinations due to close family bereavement, COVID-19 illness during those examinations, and certain other categories of serious illness, to be clearly and strictly delineated. The SEC will issue further details regarding these examinations, with all arrangements guided by prevailing public health advice. There will also be further engagement with stakeholders in this matter.

All schools have an additional allocation of Special Education Teaching (SET) hours that are specifically used to support the identified additional and special educational needs of students. The decisions made by senior management in the use of those hours should be underpinned by the principles laid out in the NEPS Continuum of Support, ensuring that the students with the greatest level of need receive the greatest level of support. Senior leadership have autonomy to use SET hours in response to both identified and emerging needs of students. Following these principles schools can make responsive changes in provision for students with special educational needs that incorporate a variety of teaching approaches including, but not restricted to, for example; co-teaching, time bound small group withdrawal and intensive one to one support.

The Guidance and SEN departments in schools are also best placed to support students and families in applications for reasonable accommodations during state examinations (RACE). The RACE scheme is operated by the State Examinations Commission. More information on these supports are outlined on [www.examinations.ie](http://www.examinations.ie).

*Question No. 515 answered with Question No. 498.*

*Question No. 516 answered with Question No. 498.*

### **School Staff**

**517. Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education if she will address the matter of remuneration of school secretaries (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41824/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Department is aware of the vitally important role played by school secretaries in the running of our schools.

In recognition of this role, special COVID-19 working arrangements were put in place and the Employee Assistance Service was extended to grant funded staff. The Department also previously fully implemented and funded the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator for a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim and officials from the Department and school management bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the issues. A process of engagement has

taken place at the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) and an understanding has been agreed on a pathway to progress the issues with a phased approach being taken to the development of proposals.

The Department is actively seeking to engage with Fórsa in an effort to resolve the issue as part of an ongoing IR process under the auspices of the WRC. Industrial action would impact on the day-to-day operation of schools at a time when so much effort has gone into ensuring they could open and stay open during the pandemic. The Department would appeal to school secretaries and to Fórsa to defer this planned action to allow further early and intensive discussions to take place.

*Question No. 518 answered with Question No. 498.*

### **School Staff**

519. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Education her plans to regularise pay, conditions and pension entitlements for all school secretaries and to end the situation in which school secretaries have different pay and conditions for carrying out similar work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41837/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Department is aware of the vitally important role played by school secretaries in the running of our schools.

In recognition of this role, special COVID-19 working arrangements were put in place and the Employee Assistance Service was extended to grant funded staff. The Department also previously fully implemented and funded the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator for a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim and officials from the Department and school management bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the issues. A process of engagement has taken place at the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) and an understanding has been agreed on a pathway to progress the issues with a phased approach being taken to the development of proposals.

The Department is actively seeking to engage with Fórsa in an effort to resolve the issue as part of an ongoing IR process under the auspices of the WRC. Industrial action would impact on the day-to-day operation of schools at a time when so much effort has gone into ensuring they could open and stay open during the pandemic. The Department would appeal to school secretaries and to Fórsa to defer this planned action to allow further early and intensive discussions to take place.

### **School Staff**

520. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the lack of entitlements for school secretaries; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41916/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Department is aware of the vitally important role played by school secretaries in the running of our schools.

In recognition of this role, special COVID-19 working arrangements were put in place and

the Employee Assistance Service was extended to grant funded staff. The Department also previously fully implemented and funded the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator for a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim and officials from the Department and school management bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the issues. A process of engagement has taken place at the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) and an understanding has been agreed on a pathway to progress the issues with a phased approach being taken to the development of proposals.

The Department is actively seeking to engage with Fórsa in an effort to resolve the issue as part of an ongoing IR process under the auspices of the WRC. Industrial action would impact on the day-to-day operation of schools at a time when so much effort has gone into ensuring they could open and stay open during the pandemic. The Department would appeal to school secretaries and to Fórsa to defer this planned action to allow further early and intensive discussions to take place.

### Flexible Work Practices

521. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education the measures she is taking to promote or facilitate remote working for staff in her Department or bodies under the aegis of her Department; the costs this has generated in terms of the provision of laptops, desktop computers or contributions to Wi-Fi costs or phone-related expenses; the number of staff who have applied for permission to work from home on a permanent or hybrid-model basis (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41949/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Staff of my department have been working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which had provided for home working to continue where possible. Following the Taoiseach's announcement on the 1st of September, my department is now in the process of planning for a phased return to the workplace.

A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

Information relating to remote working arrangements for the aegis bodies of my department and associated costs, along with costs generated within my department for the provision of laptops, mobile phones and data costs are set out in the attachments provided.

#### Department of Education

Device	Number of devices	Cost
Laptops	831	€589,188
Mobile Phones	424	€15.95 per month tariff per device

Additional data was purchased at a cost of €1,000. This data was shared between the Department of Education and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

#### Costs associated with Working from Home

Department of Education Aegis Bodies	Cost of laptops and desktop computers - 2020 & to date in 2021	Costs of mobile phones, phone related expenses and Wi-Fi to support remote working - 2020 & to date in 2021	Number of Staff who have applied for permission to work from home on a permanent or hybrid basis
	€	€	
An Chomhairle um Oideachais Gaeltachta agus Gaelsco-laíochta	4,659	-	See Note 4
Caranua - The Residential Institutions Redress Statutory Fund (Note 1)	-	-	
Commission to Inquiry into Child Abuse	13,122	-	See Note 4
Educational Research Centre	41,506	4,892	See Note 4
National Centre for Guidance in Education	5,707	8,525	See Note 4
National Council for Curriculum & Assessment	4,653	2,906	See Note 4
National Council for Special Education	130,000	14,720	See Note 4
Residential Institutions Redress Board	3,258	2,042	See Note 4
Residential Institutions Review Committee (Note 2)	-	-	
State Examinations Commission (Note 3)	-	-	See Note 5
Teaching Council	66,714	15,911	See Note 4

#### Notes to table on Costs associated with Working from Home

Note 1 - Caranua - The Residential Institutions Redress Fund closed its executive office in March 2021. Caranua's staff commenced working from home on 16th March 2020. The Department understands that Caranua's pre-existing phone, case management and shared drive systems supported the move to remote working. A number of staff already had access to laptops to support attendance at outreach events. Caranua is currently in wind-down.

Note 2 - The Residential Institutions Review Committee has no employees.

Note 3 - State Examinations Commission (SEC) - Following the outbreak of COVID 19, which led to the cancellation of the Examinations in 2020 and the introduction of a system of Calculated Grades, the SEC was deemed an essential service. While some remote working was put in place initially there were no additional costs associated with remote working. SEC staff were seconded to the Department of Education to work on the Calculated Grades, these staff continued to work in the SEC, while other staff returned to work in head office in September 2020. SEC head office staff continued to work in the office, with the SEC operating the Leaving Certificate Examinations and the Accredited Grades in 2021.

Note 4 - Notes in regard to Remote working in Department of Education aegis bodies

In line with Government guidance staff of the Department's aegis bodies, with the exception of the State Examinations Commission, have been directed to work from home since March 2020. At the time of responding, Government advice was that staff should "continue to work from home where possible". Aegis bodies are in the process of engaging with staff to address the development of plans in relation to future working arrangements to address remote and hybrid working arrangements within the aegis bodies. As Caranua closed its executive office in March 2021, the issue of requests for hybrid or remote working does not arise.

Note 5 - The State Examinations Commission has advised that the nature of the work of the SEC does not lend itself to remote working, except in the case of certain specialised posts.

*Questions - Written Answers*  
**Special Educational Needs**

522. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education if she will address a matter (details supplied) regarding a special needs assistant; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41973/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The NCSE has responsibility for planning and coordinating school supports for children with special educational needs including the allocation of SNAs and reviews.

The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme is designed to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs. Such support is provided in order to facilitate the attendance of those pupils at school and also to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills.

SNAs are not allocated to individual children but to schools as a school based resource. The deployment of SNAs within schools is a matter for the individual Principal/Board of Management of the school. SNAs should be deployed by the school in a manner which best meets the care support requirements of the children enrolled in the school for whom SNA support has been allocated.

It is a matter for schools to allocate support as required, and on the basis of individual need, which allows schools flexibility in how the SNA support is utilised.

In light of the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the introduction of the new Frontloaded Allocation Model for SNAs for students in mainstream classes in primary and post-primary schools is to be deferred for a further year to the beginning of the 2022/23 school year.

In order to minimise disruption for schools, in the current circumstances, and to provide for continuity of allocations the following arrangements for the allocation of Special Needs Assistants for mainstream classes for the 2021/22 school year:

- Existing mainstream class SNA allocations in schools on 30 April 2021 will be maintained and will automatically rollover into the 2021/22 school year.

- No school will therefore receive an allocation less than that which they had on 30 April 2021.

- SNAs currently in mainstream settings can continue in post for the next school year in the normal way.

- Priority consideration will now be given by the NCSE to applications for increased support for the 2021/22 school year, in particular, applications from schools with no SNAs and developing schools will be prioritised. Determinations will be made before 30 June. Other applications will be processed in order of date received.

- As in previous years, where circumstances change during the course of the 2021/22 school year that materially increase the level of care need in a school to the extent that the school can clearly demonstrate that it cannot be met within the existing SNA allocation, the school may apply to the NCSE for a review. Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website [ncse.ie/for-schools](http://ncse.ie/for-schools).

The NCSE have published the SNA allocations on their website [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

SNA allocations for special classes and special schools are not affected by this arrangement.

Circular 0029/2021 has been published and advises schools of the arrangements for the allocation of SNAs for the 2021/22 school year.

Provisions set out in Circular 0030/2020 has been extended for the 2021/22 school year.

Circulars 29/2021 and 30/2020 are available on the Department's website.

My Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations. Accordingly your correspondence has been forwarded to the NCSE for direct reply.

### **Departmental Policies**

523. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education if she will consider the implementation of a programme (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41977/21]

647. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Education the position regarding a national policy for the care of children with food allergies some of which can pose a significant health risk to children in pre-schools, primary schools and secondary schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43187/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 523 and 647 together.

The Board of Management of each school is responsible for the care and safety of all pupils. It is important that the school management authority requests parents to ensure that the school is made aware of any medical condition suffered by any pupils attending. Where the school is aware of potential difficulties that may arise as a consequence of a medical condition suffered by one or more pupils, it may be possible for the management authorities, working in conjunction with parents, teachers and children to put preventative measures in place to lessen the possibility of any difficulties arising or to ensure that, if a pupil suffers from an illness requiring, for example, the administration of medication, that appropriate treatment is available.

The administration of medicines in primary schools is the subject of an agreement between the Irish National Teachers Organisation and the organisation representing school management at primary level. While this agreement specifies that no teacher can be required to administer medicine or drugs to pupils, it also sets out procedures that must be followed where a teacher or teachers agree to do so. The position is that either the parents of the child should make themselves available to administer medication as required, or where they wish the staff in the school to administer it, they should indemnify the school.

My Department cannot direct any member of the Board of Management or the teaching staff of the school to administer medical treatment to pupils, action and procedures which are normally carried out by medical professionals such as doctors and nurses.

Where a child requires adult assistance to assist in the administration of medicine and where the extent of assistance required would overly disrupt normal teaching time, SNA support may be allocated for this purpose.

It is a matter for the Board of Management to ensure that SNAs are in a position to effectively meet the care needs of pupils for whom SNA support has been allocated in the school, when appointing an SNA.

Where specific training is required, the Board of Management should liaise with the Health Service Executive (HSE) in order to ensure that the HSE provides guidance and training that enables the SNA to meet the care needs of the pupil in an appropriate manner. It is a matter for individual school authorities to make such arrangements locally.

### **School Enrolments**

524. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Education if an analysis has been conducted on the demand for post-primary school places in the Dublin 9 area; her plans to ensure a sufficient number of post-primary school places in the Dublin 9 area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41979/21]

**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, school enrolment data and information on residential development activity, to identify where additional school accommodation is needed at post-primary level. Dublin 9 is partly within each of the Whitehall\_SantryD9, Beaumont\_CoolockD5 and Drumcondra\_Marino\_D1 school planning areas.

The most recent projections for all three school planning areas indicate increasing requirements at post primary level. My Department is currently working to examine the capacity of the schools in the area to meet this projected demand.

A number of capital projects have been recently completed or are currently planned or underway in the Dublin 9 area, including expansions at St. Aidan's CBS, Dominican College, Clonturk College and Scoil Caitriona. Furthermore, a new post primary school was announced to be established to serve the Drumcondra\_Marino\_D1 school planning area. The additional capacity being provided by all of these projects is being considered in the context of the projected future requirements in the area.

School place requirements nationally, including in Dublin 9, will continue to be kept under on-going review and in particular will have regard to the impact of the increased rollout of housing provision as outlined in Project Ireland 2040.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

525. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education if she will address a matter (details supplied) regarding Covid-protocols in schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41981/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Department has always been guided by Public Health as to the mitigation measures needed to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in our schools. The aim of all of the Covid-19 infection prevention and control measures that have been put in place for schools is to support schools to operate safely and prevent the introduction of Covid-19 and also the onward of transmission of Covid-19 among the school community. These measures protect pupils, their parents and school staff and are very effective when adhered to.

Current public health advice makes it a requirement for a face mask to be worn by teachers, staff in schools and students attending post-primary school.

The HPSC keeps infection prevention and control measures under review on an ongoing basis. The advice regarding face masks has not changed for the new school year.

The Department is also working with the HSE Testing Pathways Working Group which is examining the use of antigen testing in education settings. The approach to antigen testing in education settings, including in schools will be informed by the pilots currently underway in childcare and third level.

The Department will continue to work with the group as it is considered important that any data collected from the pilot of antigen testing within the wider education sector is available to inform decisions on the appropriateness of more widespread deployment of such tests within the schools sector and the potential to scale to the sector.

The Department will continue to engage regularly with public health officials in respect of the safe operation of schools during Covid-19.

*Question No. 526 answered with Question No. 498.*

*Question No. 527 answered with Question No. 498.*

### **Schools Building Projects**

528. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Education when the stage 1 submission for a school extension (details supplied) will be approved; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42004/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The School Authorities submitted a Stage 1 Report for approval to the Department in August 2020. This was reviewed by relevant officials and my Department reverted back to the school with recommendations in September 2020.

A further submission was then sent to my Department in May 2021 which did not address the issues raised in September 2020. A Stage 1 addendum report is now required. This report must respond to the queries raised and must include a 2-storey option for consideration and as previously recommended.

It is now a matter for the School Authority to liaise with its Design Team and resubmit this Addendum report.

### **School Staff**

529. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Education the situation regarding negotiations with school secretaries in terms of their employment conditions and their pension entitlements; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42006/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Department is aware of the vitally important role played by school secretaries in the running of our schools.

In recognition of this role, special COVID-19 working arrangements were put in place and the Employee Assistance Service was extended to grant funded staff. The Department also previously fully implemented and funded the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator for a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay

rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim and officials from the Department and school management bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the issues. A process of engagement has taken place at the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) and an understanding has been agreed on a pathway to progress the issues with a phased approach being taken to the development of proposals.

The Department is actively seeking to engage with Fórsa in an effort to resolve the issue as part of an ongoing IR process under the auspices of the WRC. Industrial action would impact on the day-to-day operation of schools at a time when so much effort has gone into ensuring they could open and stay open during the pandemic. The Department would appeal to school secretaries and to Fórsa to defer this planned action to allow further early and intensive discussions to take place.

### **School Facilities**

530. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education when the sites acquisition and property management unit of her Department will issue a decision in respect of an application for consent to allow a school (details supplied) apply for planning permission for the development of a new hockey pitch and changing facilities; if her attention has been drawn to the ongoing delays in processing this application; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42009/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department following a review of the application has issued a reply to the school in recent days regarding this matter.

*Question No. 531 answered with Question No. 498.*

*Question No. 532 answered with Question No. 498.*

### **School Facilities**

533. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Education the position regarding a request for additional facilities at a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42032/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The school referred to by the Deputy was approved funding in March 2021 for the provision an 80m<sup>2</sup> mainstream classroom and a 15m<sup>2</sup> SET Room under my Department's Additional Accommodation Scheme (ASA). Subsequently the school submitted another ASA application for the provision of 2 special classes and associated accommodation and this application is currently being assessed.

In relation to the school's application for a GP Room, as the Deputy is aware, the main focus of resources over the last decade and for the coming period is on the provision of additional capacity to cater for increasing demographics. The second half of the NDP (from 2023 onwards) will see an increasing focus on the upgrade and refurbishment of the existing school stock. This will include a PE Hall/GP Room build and modernisation programme to ensure that students in all schools have appropriate facilities to support PE provision.

### **Special Educational Needs**

534. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education if additional SNA hours will be provided in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42126/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The NCSE has responsibility for planning and coordinating school supports for children with special educational needs including the allocation of SNAs and reviews.

The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme is designed to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs. Such support is provided in order to facilitate the attendance of those pupils at school and also to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills.

A child's care needs will change and evolve over time so it is also important that the level of supports provided also change.

SNAs are not allocated to individual children but to schools as a school based resource. The deployment of SNAs within schools is a matter for the individual Principal/Board of Management of the school. SNAs should be deployed by the school in a manner which best meets the care support requirements of the children enrolled in the school for whom SNA support has been allocated.

It is a matter for schools to allocate support as required, and on the basis of individual need, which allows schools flexibility in how the SNA support is utilised.

In light of the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the introduction of the new Frontloaded Allocation Model for SNAs for students in mainstream classes in primary and post-primary schools is to be deferred for a further year to the beginning of the 2022/23 school year.

In order to minimise disruption for schools, in the current circumstances, and to provide for continuity of allocations the following arrangements for the allocation of Special Needs Assistants for mainstream classes for the 2021/22 school year:

- Existing mainstream class SNA allocations in schools on 30 April 2021 will be maintained and will automatically rollover into the 2021/22 school year.

- No school will therefore receive an allocation less than that which they had on 30 April 2021.

- SNAs currently in mainstream settings can continue in post for the next school year in the normal way.

- Priority consideration will now be given by the NCSE to applications for increased support for the 2021/22 school year, in particular, applications from schools with no SNAs and developing schools will be prioritised. Determinations will be made before 30 June. Other applications will be processed in order of date received.

- As in previous years, where circumstances change during the course of the 2021/22 school year that materially increase the level of care need in a school to the extent that the school can clearly demonstrate that it cannot be met within the existing SNA allocation, the school may apply to the NCSE for a review. Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website [ncse.ie/for-schools](http://ncse.ie/for-schools).

The NCSE have published the SNA allocations on their website [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

SNA allocations for special classes and special schools are not affected by this arrangement.

Circular 0029/2021 has been published and advises schools of the arrangements for the allocation of SNAs for the 2021/22 school year.

Provisions set out in Circular 0030/2020 has been extended for the 2021/22 school year.

Circulars 29/2021 and 30/2020 are available on the Departments website.

My Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations. Accordingly your correspondence has been forwarded to the NCSE for direct reply.

### **School Staff**

535. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education the progress to date in finalising the pay and conditions for school secretaries and caretakers with a union (details supplied); the timeline for the finalisation of these issues; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42133/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Department is aware of the vitally important role played by school secretaries and caretakers in the running of our schools.

In recognition of this role, special COVID-19 working arrangements were put in place and the Employee Assistance Service was extended to grant funded staff. The Department also previously fully implemented and funded the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator for a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim and officials from the Department and school management bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the issues. A process of engagement has taken place at the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) and an understanding has been agreed on a pathway to progress the issues with a phased approach being taken to the development of proposals.

The Department is actively seeking to engage with Fórsa in an effort to resolve the issue as part of an ongoing IR process under the auspices of the WRC. Industrial action would impact on the day-to-day operation of schools at a time when so much effort has gone into ensuring they could open and stay open during the pandemic. The Department would appeal to school secretaries and to Fórsa to defer this planned action to allow further early and intensive discussions to take place.

### **School Staff**

536. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Education the progress that has been made in finalising the pay and conditions for school secretaries and caretakers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42138/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Department is aware of the vitally important role played by school secretaries and caretakers in the running of our schools.

In recognition of this role, special COVID-19 working arrangements were put in place and the Employee Assistance Service was extended to grant funded staff. The Department also pre-

viously fully implemented and funded the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator for a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim and officials from the Department and school management bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the issues. A process of engagement has taken place at the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) and an understanding has been agreed on a pathway to progress the issues with a phased approach being taken to the development of proposals.

The Department is actively seeking to engage with Fórsa in an effort to resolve the issue as part of an ongoing IR process under the auspices of the WRC. Industrial action would impact on the day-to-day operation of schools at a time when so much effort has gone into ensuring they could open and stay open during the pandemic. The Department would appeal to school secretaries and to Fórsa to defer this planned action to allow further early and intensive discussions to take place.

### **School Staff**

**537. Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the fact that school secretaries are still required to sign onto jobseeker's benefit over the school summer holidays and other school breaks despite the commitments made in October 2020 by the Government to regularise the employment, terms and conditions and pension rights of school secretaries (details supplied); the status of progress in relation to the commitment made; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42139/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Department is aware of the vitally important role played by school secretaries in the running of our schools.

In recognition of this role, special COVID-19 working arrangements were put in place and the Employee Assistance Service was extended to grant funded staff. The Department also previously fully implemented and funded the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator for a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim and officials from the Department and school management bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the issues. A process of engagement has taken place at the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) and an understanding has been agreed on a pathway to progress the issues with a phased approach being taken to the development of proposals.

The Department is actively seeking to engage with Fórsa in an effort to resolve the issue as part of an ongoing IR process under the auspices of the WRC. Industrial action would impact on the day-to-day operation of schools at a time when so much effort has gone into ensuring they could open and stay open during the pandemic. The Department would appeal to school secretaries and to Fórsa to defer this planned action to allow further early and intensive discussions to take place.

### **Special Educational Needs**

**538. Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education the status of reform of the

summer provision; the status of an issue raised in relation to a child (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42140/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The purpose of the Home Tuition Grant Scheme is to provide funding towards the provision of a compensatory educational service for children who, for a number of specific reasons, are unable to attend school.

Home tuition is not an alternative to a school placement and is provided in very limited and specific circumstances. By its nature, it is intended to be a short term intervention.

The scheme provides a compensatory educational service for

- Children with special educational needs seeking an educational placement in a recognised school

- Students, enrolled in schools, with significant medical conditions which has caused, and is likely to continue to cause, major disruption to their attendance at school

- The scheme also provides Home Tuition for pre-school/early educational intervention for children with autism who meet the scheme's eligibility criteria.

Where a child is attending an early intervention or private pre-school setting, the home tuition hours allocated will be the difference between the hours approved in the pre-school or early intervention setting and the maximum home tuition hours for which the child would normally be eligible under the terms of this scheme.

Under the Scheme, in certain cases and where appropriate having regard to the criteria, the Home Tuition Grant may be extended until the end of July.

As tuition takes place outside the usual school structure it is important that home tutors are qualified to provide an educational programme. Accordingly, it is a condition of the scheme that parents/legal guardians recruit a tutor who is qualified in the sector in which tuition is being provided, and is registered with the Teaching Council for the duration of the approved tuition, up to and including issue of final payment.

Where all efforts have failed to secure the services of a teacher qualified to teach in the sector concerned, the Department may consider the engagement of a person who is registered with the Teaching Council and has a primary degree (minimum Level 7 on the National Framework of Qualifications) in a relevant area, e.g. Psychology.

In line with policy advice received from the NCSE, a review of the July Provision programme was commenced in 2019. This review process was paused due to the impact of COVID-19, during which the summer education programme was significantly enhanced and expanded to take into account the effect of school closures over 2020 and 2021. The review of the programme will recommence at the earliest possible stage.

### **Teaching Council of Ireland**

539. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Education if the Teaching Council has the right to refuse recognition to a qualified teacher who has been registered with the council since 2009 (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42171/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I note that the details in this particular

case have not been provided, however the following is the position in relation to registration with the Teaching Council.

Under the Teaching Council Acts 2001-2015 the Teaching Council is the body with the statutory authority and responsibility for the regulation of the teaching profession in Ireland including the registration of teachers in the State.

The Teaching Council registers teachers in line with the requirements set out in the Teaching Council Act 2001-2015 and the Teaching Council (Registration) Regulations 2016.

Where a teacher does not meet the requirements for full registration the Council may register a teacher subject to conditions under Section 31(6)b of the Acts and specify the period of time in which the conditions shall be complied with. Teachers registered with conditions are generally given 3 years in which to satisfy the conditions. If a teacher fails to satisfy the condition within that period of time, they may request an extension of time. Section 32(1)b of the Acts states that it is at the discretion of the Council to grant an extension to that period of time.

In order to ensure that all teachers are aware of the expiry date of their conditions, the Council issues a number of notices by email/SMS/letter to the teacher. In total an average of seven communications are issued starting 4 months in advance of the expiration date. This is to allow the teacher time to provide the necessary evidence or extension request with the required supporting documentation.

The Council processes all extension requests in the context of the Procedures – Extension Request Assessments as published on the website. The Registration Panel on behalf of the Council consider the extension requests and supporting documentation on a case by case basis. Where the extension of time is refused the teacher is offered the opportunity to have the decision reviewed by the Registration Review Group and should submit a request for a review within 21 days of receiving the original decision.

If a teacher has not met the conditions of registration and fails to submit an extension request to the Council, they lapse from the Register of Teachers in line with Section 32(2) of the Acts. The criteria is applied equally to all registrants and as such it is important to ensure all applicants are subject to the same procedures.

The person referred to by the Deputy should continue to liaise directly with the Teaching Council and follow their guidance in order to meet the criteria to obtain full registration.

### **School Staff**

540. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of school secretaries who are currently paid under the 1978-79 scheme across all school types. [42182/21]

541. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the percentage of school secretaries that are currently paid under the 1978-79 scheme across all school types. [42183/21]

542. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of school caretakers that are currently paid under the 1978-79 scheme across all school types. [42184/21]

543. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the percentage of school caretakers that are currently paid under the 1978-79 scheme across all school types.

[42185/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 540 to 543, inclusive, together.

The table below sets out the number of school secretaries (clerical officers under 1978/1979 scheme) and caretakers who are paid directly through the Non-Teaching Staff (NTS) Payroll in my Department. As of 25th August 2021 there are 263 school secretaries and 65 caretakers.

-	Headcount	Whole Time Equivalent (WTE)
School Secretary/CO - Primary	153	135.5
School Secretary/CO - Secondary	110	98
Caretaker	65	65

In addition, Boards of Management of schools are responsible for the employment of grant-funded ancillary staff. It is a matter for each school to determine the level of ancillary services required for the school.

My Department provides Capitation Grant funding to all recognised Primary schools and Post-Primary schools in the Free Education Scheme. The two main grants are the Capitation Grant to cater for day to day running costs such as heating, lighting, cleaning, insurance, general up-keep etc. and the Ancillary Services Grant/School Services Support Fund (SSSF) to cater for the cost of employing ancillary services staff. The Deputy may wish to note that schools have the flexibility to use these grants as a common grant.

Further information is available in the relevant circulars on my Department's website at the links below:

Capitation Grant:

[www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0038\\_2020.pdf](http://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0038_2020.pdf)

[www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0052\\_2020.pdf](http://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0052_2020.pdf)

Ancillary/SSSF Grants:

[www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0017\\_2021.pdf](http://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0017_2021.pdf)

[www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0082\\_2020.pdf](http://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0082_2020.pdf)

In addition to grant-funded ancillary staff, the Community & Comprehensive and ETB Sectors have secretary and caretaker posts sanctioned by the Department and paid through a non-teaching pay grant.

Due to the fact that Boards of Management are each responsible for the employment of ancillary staff in schools, it is not possible to provide information of the percentage of school secretaries and caretakers paid under the 1978/1979 scheme.

*Question No. 541 answered with Question No. 540.*

*Question No. 542 answered with Question No. 540.*

*Question No. 543 answered with Question No. 540.*

## School Staff

544. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Education the number of primary school principals appointed in County Westmeath from 2011 to 2021, by gender, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42188/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The detailed information sought by the Deputy is not readily available in my Department.

It would take an investment of IT and other staffing resources to obtain this information. It is not possible given that the resource priorities must be allocated to ensuring the payment of teaching and non teaching staff on payrolls operated by my Department to provide this information.

The information that is available in relation to the number of teachers in primary schools on a county basis as provided by the managerial authorities of the schools is published in the Statistics Section of my Department's website.

The link to access the information is [www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Data-on-Individual-Schools/](http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Data-on-Individual-Schools/)

Statistics on a county basis are not compiled for the number of teachers but the information available in relation to the overall numbers including gender is available on the website. The link to access this information is [www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/teacher-statistics/](http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/teacher-statistics/).

### School Staff

545. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Education if her Department is promoting any policies to address gender inequalities faced by male and female primary school teachers seeking promotion; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42189/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2015, which commenced on 1 January 2016, provided for certain changes in the exclusion of discrimination on particular grounds in certain employments (i.e. educational or medical institutions maintained, in whole or in part, by monies provided by the Oireachtas) by amending Section 37 of the Employment Equality Act, 1998.

In Department Circular 0044/2019, section 6.7(vi) of Chapter 3 "Appointment Procedures for Assistant Principals and Deputy Principals (Internal Competition)" sets out that "Interview Boards must ensure that questions asked at interview do not lead to discrimination on the grounds set out in Section 6(2) of the Employment Equality Acts, 1998-2015 i.e. gender, civil status, family status, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, race and member of the Travelling Community".

Also, section 7.7 of Chapter 4 "Appointment Procedures for Principal & Deputy Principal (Open Competition)" of this circular states "Advertisements must not indicate or be reasonably understood to indicate an intention to discriminate on the grounds as set out in Section 6(2) of the Employment Equality Acts, 1998-2015 i.e. gender, civil status, family status, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, race and member of the Travelling Community. Special care should be taken in drafting the advertisement, especially in indicating the gender category of the school, so as to ensure that it will be understood by all that both men and women are eligible to apply and will be given equal consideration".

### School Staff

546. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the commitments made in October 2020 to regularise the employment, terms and conditions and pension rights of school caretakers; the status of the progress of this commitment made; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42205/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Department is aware of the vitally important role played by school secretaries and caretakers in the running of our schools.

In recognition of this role, special COVID-19 working arrangements were put in place and the Employee Assistance Service was extended to grant funded staff. The Department also previously fully implemented and funded the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator for a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim and officials from the Department and school management bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the issues. A process of engagement has taken place at the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) and an understanding has been agreed on a pathway to progress the issues with a phased approach being taken to the development of proposals.

The Department is actively seeking to engage with Fórsa in an effort to resolve the issue as part of an ongoing IR process under the auspices of the WRC. Industrial action would impact on the day-to-day operation of schools at a time when so much effort has gone into ensuring they could open and stay open during the pandemic. The Department would appeal to school secretaries and to Fórsa to defer this planned action to allow further early and intensive discussions to take place.

### **School Staff**

547. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Education the status of a matter (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42219/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Department is aware of the vitally important role played by school secretaries in the running of our schools.

In recognition of this role, special COVID-19 working arrangements were put in place and the Employee Assistance Service was extended to grant funded staff. The Department also previously fully implemented and funded the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator for a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim and officials from the Department and school management bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the issues. A process of engagement has taken place at the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) and an understanding has been agreed on a pathway to progress the issues with a phased approach being taken to the development of proposals.

The Department is actively seeking to engage with Fórsa in an effort to resolve the issue as part of an ongoing IR process under the auspices of the WRC. Industrial action would impact on the day-to-day operation of schools at a time when so much effort has gone into ensuring they could open and stay open during the pandemic. The Department would appeal to school secretaries and to Fórsa to defer this planned action to allow further early and intensive discussions to take place.

## Residential Institutions

548. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education the funding allocated to the residential institutions redress scheme; the number of applications approved and paid to date; the average payment; the number of ineligible applications; the number of applications refused; and the number of applications withdrawn, in tabular form. [42221/21]

549. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education the funding allocated to the residential institutions redress scheme for administrative purposes including staffing, legal and premises costs. [42222/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 548 and 549 together.

The Residential Institutions Redress Board was established under the Residential Institutions Redress Act 2002 to make awards to persons who, as children, were abused while resident in industrial schools, reformatories and other institutions subject to state regulation or inspection. The Residential Institutions Redress Board no longer has the power to accept new applications since the 16th September 2011. At this stage the Redress Board is in wind-down mode having completed processing all applications and applicant costs.

Since inception the administrative costs of the scheme up to December 2020 paid by my Department is € 73.8 M which includes the administrative costs of both the Residential Institutions Redress Board and the Residential Institutions Review Committee.

Overall expenditure on the Scheme is in the order of € 1.245 billion.

As of December 2020, the following is the position -

Total number of awards made by the Redress Board	15,594
Average award	€62,247
No. of applications withdrawn, refused or resulting in a nil or no award	1,069

The total paid for Applicant legal and associated costs up to December 2020 is € 194 million.

More detailed data is contained the Redress Board's Annual Reports.

[www.rirb.ie/annualReport.asp](http://www.rirb.ie/annualReport.asp)

*Question No. 549 answered with Question No. 548.*

## School Curriculum

550. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education if she will address a matter regarding greyhound racing in the curriculum (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42225/21]

556. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Education if her Department deems the content of a CSPE school book (details supplied) being used in Irish schools appropriate; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42287/21]

566. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education if an issue in relation to a school textbook (details supplied) will be addressed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42380/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 550, 556 and 566 together.

The current policy within my Department is not to endorse or promote any particular programme, product or publication to support the teaching of subjects. However, there are a number of exceptions where my Department has procured textbooks or resources in order to fill a specific and urgent need. Apart from a small number of prescribed texts at post-primary, determined by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the decisions on which textbooks, programmes and products to use in primary and post-primary schools are taken at school level.

In terms of the content the Deputy refers to, my Department does not have a role in approving, commissioning, sponsoring or endorsing any content in any educational product. The curriculum specification and prescribed syllabus materials are determined by the NCCA and it is the responsibility of each individual school to select the resources that it will use to support its implementation of the curriculum. With respect to the specific issue raised, it should be noted that the specification for Junior Cycle CSPE does not contain any reference to or mention of greyhound racing.

The knowledge and skills that students are expected to gain across all curriculum areas are published in subject specifications on [www.curriculumonline.ie](http://www.curriculumonline.ie).

The NCCA does not advise upon the content of specific text books. Nor does the NCCA review or provide feedback on textbooks or have any role in endorsing or approving textbooks. There are no written guidelines setting out this relationship between the NCCA and educational publishers. It is a matter for publishers and their editing processes to ensure their textbooks are fit for purpose in a competitive market and for schools to choose which, if any, of these textbooks they believe will support the teaching of the curriculum. It remains open to those with concerns to contact schools directly using the information publically available on my department's website. [www.education.ie/en/find-a-school](http://www.education.ie/en/find-a-school)

My Department does not review or approve the content of textbooks published by private companies, as this may be seen as an indication of approval for their use in schools. Any concerns regarding material published in textbooks should be raised with the publisher themselves.

### **School Facilities**

551. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Education the number of classrooms or teaching spaces that currently have a carbon dioxide monitor installed, by county, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42234/21]

552. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Education the optimum parts per million range her Department will be recommending with regard to the use of carbon dioxide monitors in classrooms as a mitigation strategy for Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42235/21]

553. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Education the additional measures such as air circulation or filtration devices that will be used to increase airflow and reduce the spread of Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42236/21]

554. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Education if she will report on the investigations and research her Department has conducted into measures (details supplied); the conclusions reached in each case; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42237/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 551 to 554, inclusive, together.

The importance of good ventilation is an important aspect of public health advice on managing Covid-19 risks and this led to the establishment of an Expert Group by the Department of Health.

A sub-group of the main Expert Group focussed exclusively on the issue of improving and monitoring ventilation in schools and this group issued a report with specific advice for schools. This report supplemented the main group report on Ventilation and related measures to reduce airborne transmission of COVID-19. The Expert Group recommended that the report be read in conjunction with advice issued by the Department of Education Practical Steps for the Deployment of Good Ventilation Practices in Schools. The Expert Sub Group report formed the basis for the most recent updating of the ventilation guidance for schools and included recommendations in relation to strengthening the message about the importance of good ventilation, the use of CO2 monitors and, where considered necessary, air cleaners. To support schools further to identify rooms which may have inadequate ventilation and to optimise comfort levels through a better understanding of the degree of window opening required in rooms, the Department have arranged for the provision to schools of a number of portable units (based on the size of each school). The use of CO2 monitors can provide a useful general indication that areas/rooms within a building may not be adequately ventilated and can enable occupants to become familiar with the impact that activities, outdoor weather and window openings have on levels of good ventilation within a room. This information can be used to inform strategies for improving ventilation and in that regard my Department has funded the provision of over 35,000 portable CO2 monitors for schools at an estimated overall cost of circa €4 million. The portable units can facilitate measurements in a wide range of locations in schools.

The use of CO2 monitors can provide a useful general indication that areas/rooms within a building may not be adequately ventilated and can enable occupants to become familiar with the impact that activities, outdoor weather and window openings have on levels of good ventilation within a room. This information can be used to inform strategies for improving ventilation and in that regard my Department has funded the provision of over 35,000 portable CO2 monitors for schools. These portable units can facilitate measurements in a wide range of locations in schools.

Deliveries of CO2 monitors to schools commenced during the 3rd week of August and are expected to be completed by mid-September. In total, it involves over 35,000 CO2 monitors being distributed to schools in either one or two deliveries over a four-week period.

The number of units provided by county is determined by the size and number of schools in each location. The bandings below have been used to allocate the monitors.

Primary Schools (Classrooms)	Monitors per school
1 classroom	2
2 to 4 Classrooms	3
5 to 8	5
9 to 12	7
13 to 16	9
17 to 20	11
21 to 24	13
25 to 30	17
31+	20

Primary Schools (Classrooms)	Monitors per school
Special Schools	Monitors per school
Special Schools	10
Secondary Schools (Free Scheme) enrolment bands	Monitors per school
<500	20
501 to 750	25
751 to 1000	30
1001+	35

As of the 7th of September 16,500 monitors have been delivered.

CO2 levels provide a guide on air quality. Monitoring CO2 levels will help schools to identify poorly ventilated rooms. The CO2 monitors being provided to schools guides them on the need to increase ventilation once Co2 levels are above 800 CO2 parts per million.

The updated guidance on ventilation references a role for air cleaners in certain more limited circumstances where for example a room is not well ventilated and works are awaited to address same. The air cleaner can assist in such cases in improving air quality but it is important to note that air cleaning devices are not a substitute for good ventilation.

A school's architect or engineer can guide a school on whether an air cleaner is necessary or appropriate.

If an individual school has particular difficulties in managing ventilation my Department is available to guide and support it as required on the appropriate strategy to address same.

My Department's ventilation guidance for schools is very clear and practical on the steps to be taken by all schools to manage ventilation levels. A copy of the guidance is published at [www.gov.ie/en/publication/ad236-guidance-on-ventilation-in-schools/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ad236-guidance-on-ventilation-in-schools/).

*Question No. 552 answered with Question No. 551.*

*Question No. 553 answered with Question No. 551.*

*Question No. 554 answered with Question No. 551.*

### School Accommodation

555. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Education the status of an application for additional accommodation for a school (details supplied) in County Clare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42264/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** An application under my Department's Additional Accommodation Scheme (ASA) was received from the management authority of the school referred to by the Deputy. The application has been assessed and my Department is satisfied that the school has sufficient accommodation to meet its current needs. The school authorities have been informed of this decision.

*Question No. 556 answered with Question No. 550.*

## Special Educational Needs

557. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the lack of SNAs in schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42312/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Ensuring that every child including children with special educational needs receive an education is a priority for the Government and my Department.

The numbers of special classes, special education teachers and Special Needs Assistants are at unprecedented levels.

The Department will spend approximately €2 Billion, or over 20% of its total educational budget on making additional provision for children with special educational needs in 2021.

This represents an increase of over 50% in total expenditure since 2011, at which point €1.247 Billion per annum was provided.

For the 2021/22 school year 2,118 special classes have been provided. This is an increase of 269 classes from the previous school year and will ensure that approximately 12,700 special class places will be available this year, including 1,600 new special class places.

Since 2011, the number of special classes in mainstream schools has increased by almost 386% from 548 to 2,118 for the 2021/2022 school year.

Budget 2021 provided for an additional 990 additional SNAs for allocation to schools, bringing the total numbers to 18,000 by December 2021.

This allocation of SNAs is to meet the care needs of pupils in 2021 and will enable the establishment of new special classes, creation of new places in special schools, support children in mainstream classes for the 2021/22 school year.

This will represent an increase of increase of 70% in the number of SNAs provided since 2011 at which point 10,575 SNAs were available.

The NCSE have published the SNA allocations on their website [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

Where circumstances change during the course of the 2021/22 school year that materially increase the level of care need in a school to the extent that the school can clearly demonstrate that it cannot be met within the existing SNA allocation, the school may apply to the NCSE for a review. Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website [ncse.ie/for-schools](http://ncse.ie/for-schools)

The NCSE has responsibility for planning and coordinating school supports for children with special educational needs including the allocation of SNAs and reviews. The Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations.

## School Transport

558. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Education the reason additional buses are not being sourced given that all seats on buses cannot be utilised due to Covid-19 restrictions resulting in some students being without a seat on a bus and have no way of getting to or from school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42313/21]

**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 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, were 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 for the 2021/22 school year will be accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. In addition all post-primary pupils who are otherwise eligible for school transport but are attending their second nearest school and have applied and paid on time will be accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. This arrangement is in place for current school year pending completion of the full review of the School Transport Scheme.

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. Late applicants and/or families who pay late are not guaranteed a seat and will only be allocated a seat if capacity is available once seats are allocated to those families who applied and paid on time for transport services for the 2021/2022 school year.

Planning for school transport for the 2021/22 school year has proceeded on the basis that the public health measures in place as schools closed at the end of the last school year would remain as term began in this new school year. This includes the recommendations from Public Health that post-primary services would operate at 50% capacity and that masks would be worn. All other measures relating to hygiene, pre-assigned seating, cleaning and the wearing of masks by post-primary students are also in place. Funding is being provided by my Department for the additional buses required so that services can operate at 50% capacity and for the cost of the other required measures.

As the vaccination programme for children on post-primary services is rolled out and as the lifting of restrictions on public transport services proceeds, the capacity limit of 50% on post-primary school transport services will be subject to ongoing review and the Department will be considering the position in this regard over the coming weeks.

Should post-primary services resume operating at 100% capacity and where additional vehicles that were provided for social distancing purposes are removed, any spare capacity available will be offered on those services to concessionary pupils or late applicants where such capacity exists.

### **State Examinations**

559. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Education if any representations were made to her or by either of (details supplied) in relation to the possibility of running predictive grades for the leaving certificate in 2022 as well as a written examination in view of the amount of time schools had to remain closed and work online in the past two years; if these bodies favour such an approach; her response to them; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42319/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I am conscious that students who are due to take their Leaving Certificate examinations in 2022 have experienced a degree of disruption to their learning.

My Department co-chairs an Advisory Group on Planning for State Examinations in con-

junction with the State Examinations Commission. The group was originally established to consider contingency arrangements for the 2020 Leaving Certificate and was reconstituted for the purposes of planning for the 2021 Leaving Certificate. The group includes representatives of students (Irish Second Level Students Union), parents (National Parents Councils), teachers (TUI and ASTI), school leadership and management bodies, the State Examinations Commission (SEC), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Department of Education, including the National Educational Psychological Service.

In meetings held in April and May, this group discussed the Leaving Certificate 2022 examinations.

On 30 June, the Advisory Group on Planning for State Examinations received an update in relation to the 2022 Leaving Certificate and Junior Cycle examinations.

Following this meeting, I announced that adjustments would be made to the 2022 examinations which are similar to those published in December 2020 in respect of Leaving Certificate 2021.

The adjustments are outlined in Assessment Arrangements for Junior and Leaving Certificate 2022, which is available on [www.gov.ie/leavingcertificate](http://www.gov.ie/leavingcertificate).

These adjustments will leave intact the familiar overall structure of the examinations, while incorporating additional choice for students in the examinations.

The adjustments provide greater choice for candidates across a wide range of subjects.

A summary advice note setting out the key curriculum and assessment arrangements for Leaving Certificate Applied Year 1 and Year 2 students in the 2021/22 school year has also been published and is also available on [www.gov.ie/leavingcertificate](http://www.gov.ie/leavingcertificate).

The system of Calculated Grades which operated for Leaving Certificate 2020 was intended to be a once-off event in 2020 given the sudden and very challenging position at that time and the impossibility of running examinations in their traditional form safely.

A decision was made by Government in February 2021 to offer a system of Accredited Grades to this year's Leaving Certificate students. The rationale for this was that, given the levels of disruption to learning experienced by current Leaving Certificate students during two significant and prolonged periods during their Senior Cycle education, it would have been unfair and unjust to require such students to sit traditional Leaving Certificate Examinations without offering an alternative or parallel process.

While schools were closed as a result of Covid-19 from January 2021, a programme of remote learning was provided to all students. Students who were in fifth year were also prioritised for a return to school following the return of sixth year students.

It is hoped that incoming sixth year students will be able to complete a full year of in-school tuition when they return to school at the start of the 2021/22 school year, and will experience no further disruption to their learning as a result of Covid-19

It was also announced, on 30 June that the State Examinations Commission (SEC) will run an alternative set of Leaving Certificate Examinations in 2022, shortly following the main set of examinations. The SEC will set out the eligibility conditions for these examinations, which will be limited to certain students who are unable to sit the main set of examinations due to close family bereavement, COVID-19 illness during those examinations, and certain other categories

of serious illness, to be clearly and strictly delineated. The SEC will issue further details regarding these examinations, with all arrangements guided by prevailing public health advice. There will also be further engagement with stakeholders in this matter.

### **Special Educational Needs**

560. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education if she will address a matter (details supplied) regarding special needs assistants; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42320/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The NCSE has responsibility for planning and coordinating school supports for children with special educational needs including the allocation of SNAs and reviews.

The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme is designed to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs. Such support is provided in order to facilitate the attendance of those pupils at school and also to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills.

The level of a child's care needs change and evolve over time and so too must the level of care support provided.

SNAs are not allocated to individual children but to schools as a school based resource. The deployment of SNAs within schools is a matter for the individual Principal/Board of Management of the school. SNAs should be deployed by the school in a manner which best meets the care support requirements of the children enrolled in the school for whom SNA support has been allocated.

It is a matter for schools to allocate support as required, and on the basis of individual need, which allows schools flexibility in how the SNA support is utilised.

In light of the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the introduction of the new Frontloaded Allocation Model for SNAs for students in mainstream classes in primary and post-primary schools is to be deferred for a further year to the beginning of the 2022/23 school year.

In order to minimise disruption for schools, in the current circumstances, and to provide for continuity of allocations the following arrangements for the allocation of Special Needs Assistants for mainstream classes for the 2021/22 school year:

- Existing mainstream class SNA allocations in schools on 30 April 2021 will be maintained and will automatically rollover into the 2021/22 school year.

- No school will therefore receive an allocation less than that which they had on 30 April 2021.

- SNAs currently in mainstream settings can continue in post for the next school year in the normal way.

- Priority consideration will now be given by the NCSE to applications for increased support for the 2021/22 school year, in particular, applications from schools with no SNAs and developing schools will be prioritised. Determinations will be made before 30 June. Other applications will be processed in order of date received.

- As in previous years, where circumstances change during the course of the 2021/22 school year that materially increase the level of care need in a school to the extent that the school can clearly demonstrate that it cannot be met within the existing SNA allocation, the school may apply to the NCSE for a review. Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website [ncse.ie/for-schools](http://ncse.ie/for-schools)

The NCSE have published the SNA allocations on their website [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

SNA allocations for special classes and special schools are not affected by this arrangement.

Circular 0029/2021 has been published and advises schools of the arrangements for the allocation of SNAs for the 2021/22 school year.

Provisions set out in Circular 0030/2020 has been extended for the 2021/22 school year.

Circulars 29/2021 and 30/2020 are available on the Departments website.

My Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations. Accordingly your correspondence has been forwarded to the NCSE for direct reply.

### **Special Educational Needs**

561. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education if a full-time special needs assistant for a primary school pupil (details supplied) in County Kerry will be reinstated; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42323/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The NCSE has responsibility for planning and coordinating school supports for children with special educational needs including the allocation of SNAs and reviews.

The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme is designed to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs. SNA support is provided to facilitate the attendance of those pupils at school and also to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills.

The nature and extent of a pupil's needs change and evolve over time and so too must the level of support provided to meet those needs.

SNAs are not allocated to individual children but to schools as a school based resource. The deployment of SNAs within schools is a matter for the individual Principal/Board of Management of the school. SNAs should be deployed by the school in a manner which best meets the care support requirements of the children enrolled in the school for whom SNA support has been allocated.

It is a matter for schools to allocate support as required, and on the basis of individual need, which allows schools flexibility in how the SNA support is utilised.

In light of the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the introduction of the new Frontloaded Allocation Model for SNAs for students in mainstream classes in primary and post-primary schools is to be deferred for a further year to the beginning of the 2022/23 school year.

In order to minimise disruption for schools, in the current circumstances, and to provide for continuity of allocations the following arrangements for the allocation of Special Needs Assis-

tants for mainstream classes for the 2021/22 school year:

- Existing mainstream class SNA allocations in schools on 30 April 2021 will be maintained and will automatically rollover into the 2021/22 school year.

- No school will therefore receive an allocation less than that which they had on 30 April 2021.

- SNAs currently in mainstream settings can continue in post for the next school year in the normal way.

- Priority consideration will now be given by the NCSE to applications for increased support for the 2021/22 school year, in particular, applications from schools with no SNAs and developing schools will be prioritised. Determinations will be made before 30 June. Other applications will be processed in order of date received.

- As in previous years, where circumstances change during the course of the 2021/22 school year that materially increase the level of care need in a school to the extent that the school can clearly demonstrate that it cannot be met within the existing SNA allocation, the school may apply to the NCSE for a review. Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website <https://ncse.ie/for-schools>

The NCSE have published the SNA allocations on their website [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

SNA allocations for special classes and special schools are not affected by this arrangement.

Circular 0029/2021 has been published and advises schools of the arrangements for the allocation of SNAs for the 2021/22 school year.

Provisions set out in Circular 0030/2020 has been extended for the 2021/22 school year.

Circulars 29/2021 and 30/2020 are available on the Departments website.

My Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations. Accordingly your correspondence has been forwarded to the NCSE for direct reply.

### **Schools Building Projects**

562. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Education if she will intervene and seek an urgent resolution to the matters halting the progression of a school building project (details supplied) in County Dublin. [42334/21]

563. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Education if potential funding streams have been explored by her Department to address the matters that have arisen in the course of progressing a school building project (details supplied) in County Dublin. [42335/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 562 and 563 together.

The major building project for the school referred to by the Deputy is currently at an advanced stage of architectural planning, Stage 2(b) – Detailed Design, which includes the applications for Planning Permission, Fire Cert and Disability Access Cert and the preparation of tender documents.

Planning permission was secured for this project in May 2020 on the basis of a proposed

amended Right of Way in favour of the neighbouring property owners referred to by the Deputy.

Discussions have been ongoing with the neighbouring property owner for a considerable time with a view to finalising an agreement in respect of the proposed amended Right of Way and matters arising from the abuttal of the two buildings.

One matter remains outstanding which relates to the relocation of an air vent on the side of the neighbouring property. A feasibility report has been carried out by the Department's Design Team, presenting two options to address the issue. However, these options have been rejected by the neighbouring property owner. Their proposal is that a new boiler should be installed on its property and that the Department of Education should pay the full cost of this.

The Deputy will appreciate that while my Department is willing to make reasonable accommodations in respect of the vent, my Department does not accept that it should carry the full cost of a new boiler house for the neighbour.

The Design Team is currently working on the completion of the Stage 2(b) report, for the school building project, which upon completion will be submitted to the Department for review.

My Department issued correspondence to the neighbour via their solicitor outlining that the proposal for a new boiler house is not acceptable as it goes much further than dealing with the issue of the air vent and requesting that they revert to the Department by 10th September with proposals in respect of vent issue only, which the Department will ask its Design Team to review and if necessary convene a meeting. In tandem my Department asked the School's design team to also explore any other options in respect of the vent. The neighbour has recently reverted in correspondence via their solicitor seeking a meeting between both parties Design Teams to endeavour to find a workable solution. My Department is liaising with the School's Design Team to arrange this meeting in the near future.

The school building project has been delayed by both the right of way and the resolution of the vent issues. My Department has been in continuous engagement with the neighbouring property with a view to progressing the school building project. As the Deputy will appreciate the school building project will provide a new 16 Classroom School and my Department is committed to progressing this project as quickly as possible.

*Question No. 563 answered with Question No. 562.*

### **School Transport**

564. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Education the estimated number of students who will not receive bus tickets due to no payment or medical card received before the deadline date, late application made after the deadline date or because the application numbers exceeded the number of seats available on the bus in the coming months; and the breakdown on these estimated figures by county. [42352/21]

**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 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, were 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 have completed the application and payment process on time for the 2021/22 school will be accommodated on school transport

services where such services are in operation. In addition all post primary pupils who are otherwise eligible for school transport but are attending their second nearest school and have applied and paid on time will be accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. This arrangement will be in place for the coming school year pending completion of the full review of the School Transport Scheme.

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.

The number of school transport tickets issued to date is 102,420, comprising 54,018 eligible post-primary and 14,143 concessionary post-primary tickets, and 20,269 eligible primary and 13,990 concessionary primary tickets.

The number of tickets issued at the same time last year was 96,963, therefore this is an overall increase of 5% in tickets issued this year to date. As Bus Éireann is continuing to allocate places on a daily basis where capacity is available, Bus Éireann is not in position to provide details at this point on final numbers who will not receive seats for the new school year.

Families who paid after the deadline are being advised their applications/payment is late and therefore they will not be guaranteed a seat for the new school year. As priority is being given to finalising outstanding applications received by the deadline date, any remaining seats will then be allocated to late applicants, within current capacity guidelines. Details can be provided by county as soon as all applications have been assessed.

### **School Transport**

565. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Education if she will ensure that the provision of school transport prior to the school reopening given that persons (details supplied) were only informed on 25 August 2021 that provision for their children will be delayed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42356/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department. In the 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, were transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

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

Children are eligible for transport where they have special educational needs arising from a diagnosed disability and are attending the nearest recognised mainstream school, special class/special school or a unit that is or can be resourced, to meet their special educational needs. Eligibility is determined following consultation with the National Council for Special Education through its network of Special Education Needs Organisers .

I am pleased to advise the Deputy that Bus Éireann has confirmed that that pupils referred to have been accommodated on a school transport service.

*Question No. 566 answered with Question No. 550.*

## Departmental Correspondence

567. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Education when a person (details supplied) will be facilitated; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42384/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, were transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

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

All children who are eligible for school transport and who complete the application and payment process on time will be accommodated on school transport services for the 2021/22 school year where such services are in operation. In addition all post-primary pupils who are otherwise eligible for school transport but are attending their second nearest school and have applied and paid on time will be accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. This arrangement is in place for current school year pending completion of the full review of the School Transport Scheme.

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

The closing date for payment for the 2021/2022 school year was the 31st July 2021. Bus Éireann has confirmed that payment was received from the family referred to on 31st August 2021 and as such their payment was late.

Late applicants and/or families who pay late are not guaranteed a seat and will only be allocated a seat if capacity is available once seats are allocated to those families who applied and paid on time for transport services for the 2021/2022 school year.

## School Transport

568. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education if capacity under the school transport scheme will return to 100% capacity in line with the return of general public transport in view of the fact this would have a significant impact on students waiting for tickets; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42385/21]

**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 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, were 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 for the 2021/22 school year will be accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. In addition all post-primary pupils who are otherwise eligible for school transport but are attending their second nearest school and have applied and paid on time will be accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. This arrangement is in place for current school year pending completion of the full review of the School Transport Scheme.

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. Late applicants and/or families who pay late are not guaranteed a seat and will only be allocated a seat if capacity is available once seats are allocated to those families who applied and paid on time for transport services for the 2021/2022 school year.

Planning for school transport for the 2021/22 school year has proceeded on the basis that the public health measures in place as schools closed at the end of the last school year would remain as term began in this new school year. This includes the recommendations from Public Health that post-primary services would operate at 50% capacity and that masks would be worn. All other measures relating to hygiene, pre-assigned seating, cleaning and the wearing of masks by post-primary students are also in place.

However, as the vaccination programme for children on post-primary services is rolled out and as the lifting of restrictions on public transport services proceeds, the capacity limit of 50% on post-primary school transport services will be subject to ongoing review and the Department will be considering the position in this regard over the coming weeks.

Should post-primary services resume operating at 100% capacity and where additional vehicles that were provided for social distancing purposes are removed, any spare capacity available will be offered on those services to concessionary pupils or late applicants where such capacity exists.

### **Special Educational Needs**

569. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education if it is possible to access information or a list of tutors for the July provision for 2022/2023 school year in the Kilkenny area. [42386/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The information requested by the Deputy is not available.

My Department's Summer Programme for 2020 was a significant expansion on the July Provision programme of previous years, and was expanded further for Summer 2021. This was in recognition of the disruptions caused to children with complex needs during the COVID-related school closures in 2020 and 2021.

For the home-based element of the Summer Programme 2021, parents engaged a teacher or SNA in a private arrangement which was then funded by the Department after the tuition was delivered. My Department does not maintain lists of teachers or SNAs for this purpose. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) published information to assist parents in sourcing the services or a teacher or SNA.

For the school-based element of the Summer Programme 2021, schools were permitted to employ teachers and SNAs from outside of their school if the staff normally employed by the

school were not available for any/all of the programme. The Teaching Council and the Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) promoted the programme with this year's graduate teachers and Professional Masters of Education (PME) students to increase the supply of available teachers. To help teachers and SNAs identify summer programme vacancies in schools in specific locations, the IPPN created a Summer Provision Noticeboard for teachers and SNAs.

In line with policy advice received from the NCSE, a review of the July Provision programme was commenced in 2019. This review process was paused due to the impact of COVID-19, and the expanded summer programme as mentioned above was implemented as a pandemic measure. The review of the programme will recommence at the earliest practicable time and it is not yet possible to comment on arrangements for upcoming school years.

### School Transport

570. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education if she is satisfied with the operation of the school transport scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42410/21]

**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 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, were 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 for the 2021/22 school year will be accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. In addition all post-primary pupils who are otherwise eligible for school transport but are attending their second nearest school and have applied and paid on time will be accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. This arrangement is in place for current school year pending completion of the full review of the School Transport Scheme.

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 commenced a review of the School Transport Scheme in February 2021. The review is being conducted with a view to examining the current scheme, its broader effectiveness and sustainability, and to ensure that it serves students and their families adequately.

Following commencement of this review the Steering Group recently presented me with an initial interim 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 approved the extension of temporary alleviation measures which allow for post-primary students who are otherwise eligible for school transport but are attending their second nearest school and have applied and paid on time. 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.

## **School Curriculum**

571. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education if she will consider the addition of driver education to the curriculum; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42425/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Road Safety Authority (RSA) has been involved for a number of years in providing a comprehensive integrated road safety education programme in pre-school, primary, post-primary, third level and in the community. This has been done in partnership many organisations including my Department, An Garda Síochána, the Health & Safety Authority and the Higher Education Authority. As part of this, the RSA has developed a range of material that teachers can use to educate school children about road safety as it applies to all road users – pedestrians, motorcyclists, cyclists and motorists. The resources are tailored to each user group. These are available on their website <https://www.rsa.ie/en/RSA/Road-Safety/Education/Teaching-resources/>

In addition, while at post-primary level, there are no plans to introduce mandatory driver education classes, basic tuition to lay a foundation in driver education is featured on many school curricula already.

In relation to 16-18 year olds, there are opportunities built into the programmes for students to engage with the content of the driver theory test. For example, the ‘Your road to safety’ - Transition Year programme, consists of a 45-hour version and a 20-hour fast-track option. The programme provides important educational material and learning on road safety for pedestrians, cyclists, motorcyclists and motorists. It covers such issues as seatbelts and airbags, driver fatigue, drink/drug driving, road-safety engineering and enforcement, basic first aid at road crashes, emergency services and rehabilitation, licensing and insurance issues, the NCT, purchasing a car and driving abroad. The programme does not include driving lessons. However, relevant driver theory test content is included at the end of each module.

## **Special Educational Needs**

572. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education the steps she is taking to support the children identified in the audiology misdiagnosis in counties Roscommon and Mayo within the education system; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42491/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** In September 2018, it was agreed between my Department and the HSE, that where children identified by the HSE Audiology Review have a special educational need arising from their hearing impairment, my Department would provide support, in line with its various schemes. Supports provided would be based on children’s individual needs, irrespective of the cause of those needs.

Where supports under my Department’s various schemes were refused due to ineligibility, funding has in certain cases been provided by the HSE. As acknowledged at the time, this led to some delays in the provision of supports. Therefore, in conjunction with the HSE, my Department reviewed the procedures involved where the schools of children identified by this review wish to apply for supports, in order to establish if there was a more efficient way of making provision.

On foot of this review, and as an exceptional measure, the provision of certain special educational needs supports outside the terms of my Department’s schemes was approved. In July 2020, the parents and the schools involved were informed of this.

Where the school wishes to apply for assistive technology for these pupils, it should do so in the usual way, i.e. by submitting the relevant application form to the local SENO or Visiting Teacher. Applications received will be reviewed as a matter of priority, and the SENO will provide my Department with a recommendation as early as possible.

Where the SENO recommends that the application meets the criteria, funding will be provided to the school through the assistive technology scheme, as normal.

Where the application does not meet the criteria however, and it is established that the equipment in question has not already been funded either by my Department or the HSE, then funding may be provided by my Department, outside of the terms of the scheme.

The equipment for which funding may be provided is as follows:

- Laptops
- Tablet computers
- Soundfield systems
- Radio Aids

The schools in question were advised that if they had previously applied for equipment under the Assistive Technology scheme, had the application refused and if the equipment was not subsequently funded by the HSE, the school should write directly to the Special Education Section of my Department, with a copy of the refusal letter, and request a review of the previously refused application.

The schools should only submit applications where the specific equipment is recommended in a professional report and the school's view is that it is essential for the pupil's education.

Funding for chair silencers (or "Chair Sox") is not provided under any of my Department's schemes. If silencers are required however, and have not been separately funded by the HSE, then the school may apply to my Department for funding towards their purchase. The application for funding can be made in writing, and a quotation should be attached to same.

I wish to again confirm to the Deputy the assurances which have previously been made in respect of additional teaching support. Since the introduction of the Special Education Teaching allocation model in 2017, it is open to these schools to engage with my Department on the level of support required for these pupils.

### **Special Educational Needs**

573. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of additional SNAs that have been hired to date in 2021. [42516/21]

574. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of additional SNAs that were hired for the beginning of the 2021-2022 academic year. [42517/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 573 and 574 together.

The NCSE has responsibility for planning and coordinating school supports for children with special educational needs including the allocation of SNAs and reviews. My Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations.

When a school has been allocated an SNA, the Board of Management, as the employer, is responsible for filling the vacancy and the decision on whether to employ a full time SNA to fill a full time post or to employ an equivalent number of part time SNAs rests with the employer.

The NCSE have confirmed that the number of additional SNA posts allocated to date in 2021 comes to 814.84 posts. Of these 84.72 related to the 2020/2021 school year.

In respect of the 2021/22 school year the NCSE have confirmed that to date, 730.12 additional SNA posts have been allocated to schools. This brings the total allocation to 17847.14 SNAs.

*Question No. 574 answered with Question No. 573.*

### **Schools Building Projects**

575. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education the current status of a primary school building project (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42526/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The major building project for the school referred to by the Deputy is currently at an advanced stage of architectural planning - Stage 2(b) which includes the application for statutory approvals and the preparation of tender documents.

My Department met with representatives of the school in April 2021 where next steps in order to progress the project were agreed. As a new planning permission application is needed this project is currently at pre-planning stage.

The Design Team is proceeding with the preparation of a new planning application and necessary surveys to accompany the application. My Department has recently received correspondence relating to the surveys. Upon review of this documentation my Department will revert to the school and its' Design Team.

When planning permission has been secured and work on necessary revisions to the Stage 2(b) documentation has been completed a revised Stage 2(b) report will be submitted to my Department for review.

Upon receipt and review of this revised report my Department will be in contact with the school regarding the further progression of the project.

### **Schools Building Projects**

576. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education the current status of a school building project (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42528/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I am pleased to inform the deputy that, following an extensive site identification and assessment exercise to identify a permanent site location for the school in question, I can confirm that Agreement in Principle has been reached with the vendor on a site for the provision of permanent accommodation for the school and the acquisition is currently progressing through the conveyancing stage.

Following completion of the acquisition, the architectural planning process for the provision of a new permanent building for the school will commence.

## School Transport

577. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education if a post-primary school in County Kerry (details supplied) will be confirmed to be the second nearest school under the school transport scheme to concessionary students in a location; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42539/21]

**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 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, were 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 for the 2021/22 school year will be accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. In addition, all post-primary pupils who are otherwise eligible for school transport but are attending their second nearest school and have applied and paid on time will be accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. This arrangement is in place for current school year pending completion of the full review of the School Transport Scheme.

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.

Pupils who reside in the area referred to by the Deputy may be eligible or concessionary to the school in question depending where they reside in the village.

## Special Educational Needs

578. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education the steps she is taking to commence all sections of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004; her plans to revise the Act to fulfil the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42543/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I am aware of the requirements of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the current legislation which supports the rights of children with disabilities to receive an education.

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

The Education for Persons with Special Needs (EPSN) Act 2004 sets out the vision for the education of children with disabilities in this country. A child with special educational needs should be educated in an inclusive environment alongside their peers unless the nature and extent of those needs would not be in the best interest of the child concerned or the other children with whom the child is to be educated. For this purpose, my Department funds a continuum of education provision which covers the full spectrum of need ranging from placement in a mainstream class with supports or a placement in a more specialist setting, a special class or special school. My Department currently spends in excess of €2b in supporting this continuum annually.

I wish to advise the Deputy that a number of sections of the Education for Persons with

Special Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 have been commenced.

The commenced provisions include those establishing the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and those providing for an inclusive approach to the education of children with special educational needs.

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

Section 1 – Interpretation

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

Section 14 – placing certain duties on schools

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

Section 39 - placing certain duties on Health Boards

Sections 40 to 53 - amending the Education Act

Schedule 1 – providing for meetings and membership of the Council

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

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

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

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

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

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

I have also indicated that one of my priorities as Minister for Special Education and Inclusion is to carry out a review of the EPSEN Act.

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

account must be taken of need, as well as diagnosis.

Policy advice has been requested from the NCSE on the implications of the UNCRPD and this is expected in the coming months.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

579. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Education if his Department will issue a directive to national schools advising that pupils can wear masks if they wish. [42552/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department has been guided by Public Health as to the mitigation measures needed to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in our schools. The aim of all of the Covid-19 infection prevention and control measures that have been put in place for schools is to support schools to operate safely and prevent the introduction of Covid-19 and also the onward transmission of Covid-19 among the school community. These measures protect pupils, their parents and school staff and are very effective when adhered to.

Current public health advice makes it a requirement for a face mask to be worn by teachers, staff in schools and students attending post-primary school. It is not a requirement for children attending primary school to wear face masks.

The HPSC keeps infection prevention and control measures under review on an ongoing basis including whether or not primary school age children should wear masks. While in individual circumstances parents may choose for their children to wear face masks to primary school, the advice regarding face masks has not changed for the new school year.

The Department will continue to engage regularly with public health officials in respect of the safe operation of schools during Covid-19.

### **Child Abuse**

580. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to cases of abuse at a school (details supplied) in Dublin 1; if she has engaged with the school and or the Jesuit Order in respect of the ongoing inquiry; the steps she has taken to contact past victims; if she will outline the supports she has made available; and if she has engaged with the school board of management in relation to the cases outside of the scope of the Jesuit inquiry. [42554/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Firstly, I wish to reassure the Deputy that my Department takes child protection very seriously and considers that the protection and welfare of children is a fundamental responsibility of all involved in the care and education of children. In this regard, any concern or allegation of a child protection nature received by staff in my Department is dealt with in accordance with the Department's Procedures for responding to Child Protection Concerns which come to the attention of staff employed by the Department of Education.

My Department does not make any judgment on the concerns which comes to its attention and ensures that the details of the concern reported to the Department, including reports which relate to historical abuse, are immediately passed on to the relevant authorities, i.e. Tusla-the Child and Family Agency, An Garda Síochána and/or the school authorities as appropriate. My Department is aware of the matter raised in the media article provided by the Deputy. My Department has no powers to investigate child protection concerns.

When contacted by individuals in relation to historical abuse, as well as reporting the details to the authorities in line with the Department's procedures, my Department provides details of counselling supports available. As part of the State's response to individuals experiencing distress as a result of childhood sexual abuse, a free National Counselling Service was set up which is run by the HSE and has been operating since 2000. Full details are available on

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/mental-health-services/national-counselling-service/>

In addition, my Department recently announced a revised ex gratia scheme to provide those, who had, by 1 July 2021, issued legal proceedings against the State in respect of day school sexual abuse with an opportunity to apply for an ex gratia payment. Details of the revised scheme are available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/90a42-revised-ex-gratia-scheme/>

It is important to note that arrangements for child protection in schools have been extensively revised and extended. In recent years, for example, the enactment of the Children First Act in 2015 led to the issue of revised Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools in 2017, with an extensive programme of professional development for teachers and school leaders. A fundamental principle of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017 is that all schools must keep pupils/students safe from harm while attending the school or while participating in school activities.

### **School Facilities**

581. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Education the reason secondary school children are still not allowed access to lockers and are being required to carry excessively heavy school bags as a result; and if she will clarify the reason for children to be denied access to lockers in schools. [42561/21]

607. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Education if national guidance has been issued to post-primary schools on whether students can access lockers this term or if it is up to each individual school to decide on this matter; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42686/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 581 and 607 together.

Each school is required to have a COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe operation through the prevention, early detection and control of COVID-19 in line with public health advice. This guidance is focused on the practical steps schools must take to minimise the risk of transmission of infection, including physical distancing measures and reducing the risk of congregation of students. It is a matter for each individual school to implement these measures locally taking into account its individual circumstances such as school layout.

My Department is aware that positive action has been taken by many schools on the issue of heavy school bags. Actions consist of a range of measures, including the arrangement of the timetable into double class periods, active liaison with parents and the co-ordination of homework by subject teachers.

The use of digital resources by teachers and students in schools is increasing. While conventional textbooks are still widely used, a number of schools have introduced or are considering introducing e-books and other digital resources to enhance students' work in school and at home. Schools can use the book grant scheme to purchase a range of digital resources relevant to the curriculum.

It should be also noted that Scoilnet.ie, the Department funded website, supports Primary and Post-Primary teachers in sharing and finding useful resources for the classroom, including the World Books online encyclopedia resource, and other valuable online content and resources to assist in teaching and learning.

Ultimately it is a matter for each individual school to determine which particular measures are most suited to its individual circumstances as to how the school concerned organises teaching and learning at this time.

### **School Transport**

582. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education if the commitment to provide concessionary school transport to students going to their second nearest post-primary school will be extended to primary school students attending their second nearest primary school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42562/21]

**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 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, were 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 for the 2021/22 school year will be accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. In addition all post-primary pupils who are otherwise eligible for school transport but are attending their second nearest school and have applied and paid on time will be accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. This arrangement is in place for current school year pending completion of the full review of the School Transport Scheme.

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 commenced a review of the School Transport Scheme in February 2021. Following commencement of this review the Steering Group recently presented me with an initial interim 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 approved the extension of temporary alleviation measures which allow for post-primary students who are otherwise eligible for school transport but are attending their second nearest school and have applied and paid on time. 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.

### **School Transport**

583. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education if the additional school transport capacity will be put on a school bus route (details supplied) in County Kerry to cater for demand; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42567/21]

**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 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, were transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

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

Under the terms of the Department's Primary School Transport Scheme children are eligible for school transport where they reside not less than 3.2 kilometres from and are attending their nearest primary school as determined by my Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who completed the application and payment process on will be accommodated on school transport services for the 2021/22 school year where such services are in operation.

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

The closing date for payment for the 2021/2022 school year was the 31st July 2021. There are currently 6 late applications from the area in question on the Bus Éireann system that have been received between August and September 2021 and these are currently being processed by Bus Éireann.

Late applicants and/or families who pay late are not guaranteed a seat and will only be allocated a seat if capacity is available once seats are allocated to those families who applied and paid on time for transport services for the 2021/2022 school year.

### **School Transport**

584. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Education if she will examine a situation (details supplied) in which there is a lack of school transport; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42570/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department. In the 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, were transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

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

Children are eligible for transport where they have special educational needs arising from a

diagnosed disability and are attending the nearest recognised mainstream school, special class/special school or a unit that is or can be resourced, to meet their special educational needs. Eligibility is determined following consultation with the National Council for Special Education through its network of Special Education Needs Organisers .

An application for school transport was received on behalf of the pupil referred to by the Deputy in my Department on 02 September, 2021 and forwarded to Bus Éireann for consideration. I am pleased to advise the Deputy that Bus Éireann has confirmed that this pupil can be accommodated on an existing service and sanction has been given for the pupil to commence on the service.

### **School Transport**

585. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Education if she will examine a lack in school transport facilities (details supplied) from Kill village, County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42571/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the 2020/21 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

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

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

All children who are eligible for school transport and who complete the application and payment process on time will be accommodated on school transport services for the 2021/22 school year where such services are in operation. Children who are not eligible for school transport may apply for transport on a concessionary basis only and may be facilitated where spare seats are available after eligible children have been accommodated. Where the number of ineligible children exceeds the number of spare seats available Bus Éireann allocates tickets for the spare seats using an agreed selection process.

Bus Éireann has advised that the pupils referred to by the Deputy are not attending their closest post primary centre, and are therefore not eligible for transport under the terms of the scheme. Bus Éireann has also advised that there is currently no service with spare capacity for the pupils to avail of for the current school year. Payment for the pupils in question was received 25/06/2021 for the 21/22 school year and a refund will be issued in due course.

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

Such requests are considered on a case by case basis following documentary evidence be-

ing submitted by the family, including but not limited to:

- The detailed steps taken to enrol the pupil in the nearest and next nearest schools.
- Evidence that an application for enrolment was made within the deadline dates specified by the school.
- A letter from the School Authorities confirming that the school was full at time of enrolment.

### **Project Ireland 2040**

586. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education the school capital projects she will include in the redrawn Project 2040; and when she met the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform on the matter. [42615/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Under the current NDP my Department has a significant existing pipeline of projects to be delivered over the coming years to meet capacity needs managed under the Large-Scale Capital Programme (LSCP) and the Additional School Accommodation Scheme (ASA). This includes circa 1,200 school building projects across the various stages of planning, design, tender and construction.

Over the last couple of months, both myself and my officials have had extensive and ongoing engagement with both the Minister of Public Expenditure and Reform and his officials on this matter.

The revised NDP is currently being finalised by Government and is due for final publication shortly

### **School Staff**

587. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Education the progress that has been made towards the regularisation of pay, pension and terms of employment for school secretaries and caretakers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42633/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Department is aware of the vitally important role played by school secretaries and caretakers in the running of our schools.

In recognition of this role, special COVID-19 working arrangements were put in place and the Employee Assistance Service was extended to grant funded staff. The Department also previously fully implemented and funded the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator for a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim and officials from the Department and school management bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the issues. A process of engagement has taken place at the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) and an understanding has been agreed on a pathway to progress the issues with a phased approach being taken to the development of proposals.

The Department is actively seeking to engage with Fórsa in an effort to resolve the issue as part of an ongoing IR process under the auspices of the WRC. Industrial action would impact

on the day-to-day operation of schools at a time when so much effort has gone into ensuring they could open and stay open during the pandemic. The Department would appeal to school secretaries and to Fórsa to defer this planned action to allow further early and intensive discussions to take place.

### **Schools Building Projects**

588. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education if she is satisfied that a school building project (details supplied) will proceed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42647/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department is aware of the challenging market conditions for tender processes that are currently underway.

My Department works within the parameters set by the Office of Government Procurement and principles of public procurement set out at both national and EU level.

The school project to which the Deputy refers is progressing through the tender process. The Design Team are liaising with the relevant tenderer and the school will be kept apprised of all developments. My Department is committed to progressing this project as quickly as possible.

### **School Facilities**

589. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education if she will request school management bodies to facilitate the return of indoor sports activities which have used school facilities in the past. [42650/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Schools are required to have a COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe operation through the prevention, early detection and control of COVID-19 in line with public health advice. This guidance is focused on the practical steps schools must take to minimise the risk of transmission of infection.

In relation to the use of school facilities by community and other groups, my Department has a policy of encouraging use, where this is possible and following consultation with the relevant school authorities. Guidelines on the use of School Buildings outside of school hours is available at <https://assets.gov.ie/24484/ca5b1787db1b47f98de31f57e977dad0.pdf>.

It is recognised that schools play an important role in their wider communities and many schools make their facilities available outside of school hours for a variety of different uses and users. The use of school facilities are a matter for individual Boards of Managements.

My Department will continue to engage regularly with the partners so that appropriate guidance can be provided to schools so that all activities including those referred to by the Deputy can operate in a safe manner in line with public health advice.

### **School Staff**

590. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Education if she and her Department can investigate, advise and provide a solution to an issue in relation to a teacher (details supplied)

at a school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42653/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Firstly, I wish to reassure the Deputy that my Department takes child protection very seriously and considers that the protection and welfare of children is a fundamental responsibility of all involved in the care and education of children. Any concern or allegation of a child protection nature, received by staff in my Department is dealt with in accordance with the Department's Procedures for responding to Child Protection Concerns which come to the attention of staff employed by the Department of Education.

My Department has no powers to investigate child protection concerns. Under these procedures the Department does not make any judgment on the concerns which comes to its attention and ensures that the details of the concern reported to the Department are immediately passed on to the relevant authorities, i.e. Tusla-the Child and Family Agency and/or An Garda Síochána, as appropriate. My Department cannot guarantee confidentiality to complainants in such circumstances as the information received must be passed on to the relevant authorities for investigation, including any details of the person reporting the concern.

In that regard, details provided by the Deputy with this question have been passed to Tusla.

The issuing, by my Department of revised Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools in 2017 brought with it an extensive programme of professional development for teachers and school leaders. A fundamental principle of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017 is that all schools must keep pupils/students safe from harm while attending the school or while participating in school activities.

My Department plays an important role in the oversight of the child protection procedures for schools. The Inspectorate carries out a range of inspections in all recognised schools. Schools are selected for inclusion in the broader inspection programme using a range of factors and information. Although the Inspectorate has no role in the investigation of individual complaints about schools, all correspondence is noted and it may, together with a range of other information, be considered by the Inspectorate in planning its inspection programme. The Inspectorate does not comment on its future planned inspection programme.

The child protection procedures for primary and post primary schools outline the obligations placed on boards of management, as employers, where an allegation of abuse is made against a member of school personnel. Chapter 7 of the procedures provides specific guidance to schools in relation to the reporting procedures for the concern as well as the protocols in relation to dealing with the employee. In a school context, the most important consideration to be taken into account is the protection of children, and their safety and well-being must be the priority. Each school authority also has a duty and responsibility, as an employer, in respect of its employees.

Under the provisions of the Education Act 1998, the board of management is the body charged with the direct governance of a school. Section 24 of the Education Act 1998 provides that the appointment, suspension and dismissal of teachers is the responsibility of boards of management of recognised schools or, where the employer is a person other than a board, by that person. My Department does not have the legal powers to instruct a school to follow a particular course of action regarding individual complaint cases, or to investigate individual complaints. However, procedures have been agreed between management and unions and have been published by my Department to assist Boards of Management/Schools.

In relation to how a parent might pursue a complaint to a school, whereas my Department provides funding and policy direction for schools, my Department, does not have the power to instruct schools to follow a particular course of direction with regard to individual complaint

cases. My Department's role is to clarify for parents and students how their grievances and complaints against schools can be progressed.

Where it is felt that there is cause for complaint, matters would normally be addressed to the individual teacher or school Principal as appropriate. If matters cannot be resolved at that level then a complaint can be addressed to the school's Board of Management. Where a school has a formal complaints procedure in place this should be followed in pursuing any complaint.

In addition responsibility for bullying in schools falls to the level of the individual school. Each school has an Anti-Bullying Policy and Code of Behaviour (or similar titles) and these are ordinarily accessible on the schools website or should be available from the school.

Where a parent is of the view that a school's board of management has failed to investigate or adequately investigate their complaint, it is open to the parent to raise the matter with the Ombudsman for Children. The Office of the Ombudsman for Children may independently investigate complaints about schools recognised by my Department, provided the parent has firstly and fully followed the school's complaints procedures. The key criterion for any intervention by the Ombudsman for Children is that the administrative actions or non-actions of a school has, or, may have, adversely affected the child.

The Teaching Council of Ireland also has power to investigate a complaint about a teacher and to conduct fitness to teach inquiries. Any person, including a member of the public, an employer or teacher may make a complaint about a registered teacher. The Teaching Council has a complaints facility that can be accessed in appropriate cases. Details are available on their website at [www.teachingcouncil.ie/](http://www.teachingcouncil.ie/)

Further details on complaints can be found on my Department's website at

[www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/9bf5d3-inclusive-education/#child-protection-and-safe-guarding](http://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/9bf5d3-inclusive-education/#child-protection-and-safe-guarding).

### **School Staff**

591. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of teachers at post-primary level hired for the 2021-2022 academic year. [42654/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Teacher allocations to all schools are approved annually by my Department in accordance with established rules based on recognised pupil enrolment. The criteria for the allocation of posts are communicated to schools annually and are available on the Department website.

The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources provided at individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and pupil enrolments on the previous 30 September.

The current number of post primary teaching posts allocated stands at 31,560. However, the allocation process for the 2021/22 school year is ongoing and the final allocation will not be known until the Autumn when schools confirm their projected pupil enrolment returns.

### **School Staff**

592. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of

primary teachers hired for the 2021-2022 academic year. [42655/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Teacher allocations to all schools are approved annually by my Department in accordance with established rules based on recognised pupil enrolment. The criteria for the allocation of posts are communicated to schools annually and are available on the Department website.

The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources provided at individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and pupil enrolments on the previous 30 September.

The current number of teaching posts allocated at primary level is 39,086. However, the allocation process for the 2021/22 school year is ongoing and the final allocation will not be known until the Autumn when the staffing appeal process has been completed.

### **School Staff**

593. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the projected recruitment of post-primary teachers for each of the years 2022 to 2025. [42656/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Actual recruitment of teachers for the years 2022-2025 is not yet known. Recruitment will be guided by the demand arising from a combination of demographic changes and natural attrition, as described in the report *Developing a Teacher Demand and Supply Model for Ireland 2021 – 2038: A Technical Report*, as well as Department of Education policy on staffing allocations, as set out annually in the relevant staffing arrangement circulars.

### **Special Educational Needs**

594. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of reducing the pupil-SNA ratio to 2:1 at both primary and secondary level. [42657/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) are a key part of the support framework for the inclusion of children with special educational needs in education. By the end of this year, there will be over 18,000 SNA posts in the education system.

SNAs work across the full continuum of education from mainstream classes through to the more specialist settings, special classes and special schools.

In respect of mainstream classes, SNAs are allocated on the basis of whole school care need and are not allocated on any pre-determined ratio. Schools have discretion in how the available resource is deployed within the school. The Department does not collect information on the number of children receiving support.

In respect of special classes and special schools, there are predetermined ratios for the allocation of SNAs. Most classes will have an allocation of two SNAs for every six students but this can vary.

In order to provide 1:2 SNA:pupils ratio in all special class and special school settings, an additional 2,373 SNAs would be required at a cost of €68.4m in a full year.

**Departmental Data**

595. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of SNAs employed in September 2020 in special classes in secondary schools. [42658/21]

596. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of SNAs employed in September 2020 in mainstream classes in secondary schools. [42659/21]

597. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of SNAs employed in September 2020 in special classes in primary schools. [42661/21]

598. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of SNAs employed in September 2020 in mainstream classes in primary schools. [42662/21]

599. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of children in mainstream primary school classes receiving the assistance of a SNA in September 2020. [42663/21]

600. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of children in mainstream secondary school classes receiving the assistance of a SNA in September 2020. [42664/21]

601. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of children in special classes at primary level receiving the assistance of a SNA in September 2020. [42665/21]

602. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of children in special classes at secondary level receiving the assistance of a SNA in September 2020. [42666/21]

603. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of children in special schools receiving the assistance of a SNA in September 2020. [42667/21]

604. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of applications for SNA support in the 2019-2020 academic year that were unsuccessful; the number of children these applications were in respect of; and if these applications were in respect of a primary school, secondary school or special school. [42668/21]

605. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of applications for SNA support in the 2020-2021 academic year that were unsuccessful; the number of children these applications were in respect of; and if these applications were in respect of a primary school, secondary school or special school. [42669/21]

606. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of applications for SNA support in the 2021-2022 academic year that were unsuccessful; the number of children these applications were in respect of; and if these applications were in respect of a primary school, secondary school or special school. [42670/21]

608. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of SNAs employed in September 2021 in special classes in secondary schools. [42691/21]

609. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of SNAs employed in September 2021 in mainstream classes in secondary schools. [42692/21]

610. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of SNAs employed in September 2021 in special classes in primary schools. [42693/21]

611. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of SNAs employed in September 2021 in mainstream classes in primary schools. [42694/21]

612. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of children in mainstream primary school classes receiving the assistance of a SNA in September 2021. [42695/21]

613. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of children in mainstream secondary school classes receiving the assistance of a SNA in September 2021. [42696/21]

614. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of children in special classes at primary level receiving the assistance of a SNA in September 2021. [42697/21]

615. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of children in special classes at secondary level receiving the assistance of a SNA in September 2021. [42698/21]

616. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the number of children in special schools receiving the assistance of a SNA in September 2021. [42699/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 595 to 606, inclusive, and 608 to 616, inclusive, together.

The provision of education for children with special needs is an ongoing priority for Government. The numbers of special classes, special education teachers and Special Needs Assistants are at unprecedented levels.

The Department will spend approximately €2 Billion, or over 20% of its total educational budget on making additional provision for children with special educational needs in 2021.

This represents an increase of over 50% in total expenditure since 2011, at which point €1.247 Billion per annum was provided.

Budget 2021 provided for an additional 990 additional SNAs for allocation to schools, bringing the total numbers to 18,000 by December 2021.

This allocation of SNAs is to meet the care needs of pupils in 2021 and will enable the establishment of new special classes, creation of new places in special schools, support children in mainstream classes for the 2021/22 school year.

This will represent an increase of increase of 70% in the number of SNAs provided since 2011 at which point 10,575 SNAs were available.

Where circumstances change during the course of the 2021/22 school year that materially increase the level of care need in a school to the extent that the school can clearly demonstrate that it cannot be met within the existing SNA allocation, the school may apply to the NCSE for a review. Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website [www.ncse.ie/for-schools](http://www.ncse.ie/for-schools).

The NCSE has responsibility for planning and coordinating school supports for children with special educational needs including the allocation of SNAs and reviews. The Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations.

The question will be referred to the NCSE for their direct reply. *Question No. 600 an-*

*swered with Question No. 595.*

*Question No. 601 answered with Question No. 595.*

*Question No. 602 answered with Question No. 595.*

*Question No. 603 answered with Question No. 595.*

*Question No. 604 answered with Question No. 595.*

*Question No. 605 answered with Question No. 595.*

*Question No. 606 answered with Question No. 595.*

*Question No. 607 answered with Question No. 581.*

*Question No. 608 answered with Question No. 595.*

*Question No. 609 answered with Question No. 595.*

*Question No. 610 answered with Question No. 595.*

*Question No. 611 answered with Question No. 595.*

*Question No. 612 answered with Question No. 595.*

*Question No. 613 answered with Question No. 595.*

*Question No. 614 answered with Question No. 595.*

*Question No. 615 answered with Question No. 595.*

*Question No. 616 answered with Question No. 595.*

### **Flexible Work Practices**

617. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Education the steps being taken to facilitate remote working within her Department and particularly to encourage remote working for those who live in the regions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42703/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Staff of my department have been working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which had provided for home working to continue where possible. This was also the position adopted by aegis bodies of my department. Following the Taoiseach's announcement on the 1st of September, my department is now in the process of planning for a phased return to the workplace.

A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

### **State Examinations**

618. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Education when the stakeholder pro-

cess on planning for an alternate sitting of the leaving certificate 2022 will commence; if she will ensure that an organisation (details supplied) is central to this process; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42718/21]

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

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

### **Flexible Work Practices**

619. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education the way in which her Department and public bodies and agencies under her remit are accommodating requests for persons to work from home. [42753/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Staff of my department have been working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which had provided for home working to continue where possible with the exception of roles where the nature of the work did not lend itself to remote working. This was also the position adopted by aegis bodies of my department. Following the Taoiseach's announcement on the 1st of September, my department is now in the process of planning for a phased return to the workplace.

A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department, Office and aegis body, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

620. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education if she will provide carbon dioxide monitors for every teaching room in each primary and secondary school in the State. [42775/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Managing ventilation is just one of a suite of public health measures in place to keep our schools safe. Updated guidance for schools on Practical Steps for the Deployment of Good Ventilation Practices in Schools was provided at the end of May following the work of an expert group that carefully considered the role of ventilation in managing COVID-19.

A copy of the guidance is published at [www.gov.ie/en/publication/ad236-guidance-on-ventilation-in-schools/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ad236-guidance-on-ventilation-in-schools/).

The over-arching approach in the guidance is for schools to have windows open as fully as possible when classrooms are not in use (e.g. during break-times or lunch-times and also at the end of each school day) and partially open when classrooms are in use.

The guidance outlines that Carbon Dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) monitors can play a part in providing a useful general indication that areas/rooms may not be adequately ventilated. They can enable occupants to become familiar with the impacts of activities, outdoor weather and window openings on levels of good ventilation.

My Department procured portable monitors that are being distributed to schools in August and September – between 2 and 20 at primary school level and between 20 and 35 at post-primary school level depending on school size, at an estimated overall cost of €4 million. This will ensure that a CO2 monitor will be available for use in every classroom in Ireland. The monitors are portable, simple to use, and will give a digital reading.

Deliveries of CO2 monitors to schools commenced in the third week of August and are expected to be completed by mid-September. In total, it involves over 35,000 CO2 monitors being distributed to, primary and post-primary schools. The target remains to have all monitors delivered by the middle of September.

Smaller sized schools will receive their full allocation in one delivery, with medium and larger sized schools receiving two deliveries. This approach maximises the number of schools that are provided with monitors as early as possible.

### **Schools Building Projects**

621. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education the impact on tenders for school building capital projects the rise in construction costs will have. [42814/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department has a large-scale and ambitious roll-out of school building projects as part of Project Ireland 2040.

The current position on all these projects is set out on the Gov.ie website and is updated on a monthly basis to reflect progress on project rollout.

There are currently over 200 school building projects at construction with a continuous stream of other projects at or near the tendering stage.

My Department is aware of the challenging market conditions for tender processes that are currently underway.

My Department works within the parameters set by the Office of Government Procurement and principles of public procurement set out at both national and EU level.

Once contracts are awarded, any variations to the contract sum are addressed within the standard provisions of the Public Works Contracts.

### **School Transport**

622. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education if the additional buses provided for school transport when at 50% capacity will be retained for 100% capacity. [42815/21]

**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 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, were 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 for the 2021/22 school year will be accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. In addition all post-primary pupils who are other-

wise eligible for school transport but are attending their second nearest school and have applied and paid on time will be accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. This arrangement is in place for current school year pending completion of the full review of the School Transport Scheme.

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. Late applicants and/or families who pay late are not guaranteed a seat and will only be allocated a seat if capacity is available once seats are allocated to those families who applied and paid on time for transport services for the 2021/2022 school year.

Planning for school transport for the 2021/22 school year has proceeded on the basis that the public health measures in place as schools closed at the end of the last school year would remain as term began in this new school year. This includes the recommendations from Public Health that post-primary services would operate at 50% capacity and that masks would be worn. All other measures relating to hygiene, pre-assigned seating, cleaning and the wearing of masks by post-primary students are also in place. However, as the vaccination programme for children on post-primary services is rolled out and as the lifting of restrictions on public transport services proceeds, the capacity limit of 50% on post-primary school transport services will be subject to ongoing review and the Department will be considering the position in this regard over the coming weeks.

Should post-primary services resume operating at 100% capacity and where additional vehicles that were provided for social distancing purposes are removed, any spare capacity available will be offered on those services to concessionary pupils or late applicants where such capacity exists.

### **School Transport**

**623. Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education if she will examine a matter (details supplied) regarding school transport. [42816/21]

**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 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, were transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

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

Under the terms of the Department's Primary School Transport Scheme children are eligible for school transport where they reside not less than 3.2 kilometres from and are attending their nearest primary school as determined by my Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who completed the application and payment process on will be accommodated on school transport services for the 2021/22 school year where such services are in operation.

Children who are not eligible for school transport and who apply for school transport are considered for spare seats that may exist after eligible children have been facilitated; such seats

are referred to as concessionary seats.

Bus Éireann has confirmed that the family, to whom the Deputy refers, resides 3.1kms from the school that they are attending therefore they are not eligible for school transport. School Transport Section has asked Bus Éireann to carry out a calibrated measurement on the route in question and will revert to the family when further information is available.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

624. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education the steps she is taking to fast-track the delivery of the 32,000 CO2 monitors to schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42824/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Deliveries of CO2 monitors to schools commenced in the third week of August and are expected to be completed by mid-September. In total, it involves over 35,000 CO2 monitors being distributed to, primary and post-primary schools.

Smaller sized schools will receive their full allocation in one delivery, with medium and larger sized schools receiving two deliveries. This approach maximises the number of schools that are provided with monitors as early as possible.

The target remains to have all monitors delivered by the middle of September.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

625. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Education the details of the procurement of CO2 monitors for our schools; when this process commenced; if there has been a delay in providing these monitors; when they will be delivered to our schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42836/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Managing ventilation is just one of a suite of public health measures in place to keep our schools safe. Updated guidance for schools on Practical Steps for the Deployment of Good Ventilation Practices in Schools was provided at the end of May following the work of an expert group that carefully considered the role of ventilation in managing COVID-19.

A copy of the guidance is published at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ad236-guidance-on-ventilation-in-schools/>

The over-arching approach in the guidance is for schools to have windows open as fully as possible when classrooms are not in use (e.g. during break-times or lunch-times and also at the end of each school day) and partially open when classrooms are in use.

The guidance outlines that Carbon Dioxide (CO2) monitors can play a part in providing a useful general indication that areas/rooms may not be adequately ventilated. They can enable occupants to become familiar with the impacts of activities, outdoor weather and window openings on levels of good ventilation.

The procurement of the monitors was carried out through a Multi-Supplier Framework, LEE004F – Lab Consumables Framework -Lot 12, established by the Education Procurement Service to run from 2020 to 2024 following an open competitive procurement process. A mini

competition for the supply of the CO2 monitors to schools under that Framework was undertaken in April 2021, with the order placed with the most economically advantageous supplier following the successful conclusion of that process.

Deliveries of CO2 monitors to schools commenced in the third week of August and are expected to be completed by mid-September. In total, it involves over 35,000 CO2 monitors being distributed to , primary and post-primary schools in the Free Scheme and schools approved on the basis of their application in the Fee Charging sector.

### **School Transport**

626. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Education the number of concessionary post primary cycle school bus ticket applications refused in 2021 on the basis of the reduced capacity allowed on school buses; if these applicants will be provided with school bus tickets when the capacity allowed on each bus increases; when she anticipates that full capacity will be allowed on school buses for post primary school children; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42867/21]

**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 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, were 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 for the 2021/22 school year will be accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. In addition, all post-primary pupils who are otherwise eligible for school transport but are attending their second nearest school and have applied and paid on time will be accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. This arrangement is in place for current school year pending completion of the full review of the School Transport Scheme.

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.

Late applicants and/or families who pay late are not guaranteed a seat and will only be allocated a seat if capacity is available once seats are allocated to those families who applied and paid on time for transport services for the 2021/2022 school year.

Planning for school transport for the 2021/22 school year has proceeded on the basis that the public health measures in place as schools closed at the end of the last school year would remain as term began in this new school year. This includes the recommendations from Public Health that post-primary services would operate at 50% capacity and that masks would be worn. All other measures relating to hygiene, pre-assigned seating, cleaning and the wearing of masks by post-primary students are also in place. However, as the vaccination programme for children on post-primary services is rolled out and as the lifting of restrictions on public transport services proceeds, the capacity limit of 50% on post-primary school transport services will be subject to ongoing review and the Department will be considering the position in this regard over the coming weeks.

Bus Éireann has confirmed that to date 102,420 pupils, including 54,018 post primary eligible pupils and 14,143 post primary concessionary pupils have been issued tickets for the

School Transport Scheme. This number is changing as tickets continue to be allocated to pupils.

Should post-primary services resume operating at 100% capacity and where additional vehicles that were provided for social distancing purposes are removed, any spare capacity available will be offered on those services to concessionary pupils or late applicants where such capacity exists.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

627. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Education if she will provide reassurance to parents of children who are returning back to school settings that adequate Covid-19 safety measures are provided including air monitors in classrooms and regulation of ventilation and air filtration; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42899/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Managing ventilation is just one of a suite of public health measures in place to keep our schools safe. Updated guidance for schools on Practical Steps for the Deployment of Good Ventilation Practices in Schools was provided at the end of May following the work of an expert group that carefully considered the role of ventilation in managing COVID-19.

A link to the published guidance and the associated background information is available at:

- <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ad236-guidance-on-ventilation-in-schools/>

- <https://www.gov.ie/ga/foilsuichan/aerala-i-scoileanna/>

The over-arching approach in the guidance is for schools to have windows open as fully as possible when classrooms are not in use (e.g. during break-times or lunch-times and also at the end of each school day) and partially open when classrooms are in use.

The guidance outlines that Carbon Dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) monitors can play a part in providing a useful general indication that areas/rooms may not be adequately ventilated. They can enable occupants to become familiar with the impacts of activities, outdoor weather and window openings on levels of good ventilation.

The Department procured a sufficient number of portable CO<sub>2</sub> monitors, to ensure that CO<sub>2</sub> monitors will be available for use in every classroom in the country, at an estimated overall cost of €4m.

Deliveries of CO<sub>2</sub> monitors to schools commenced in the third week of August and are expected to be completed by mid-September. In total, it involves over 35,000 CO<sub>2</sub> monitors being distributed to primary and post-primary schools.

As of the 7th of September 16,200 units have been delivered to schools across the country. The target remains to have all monitors delivered by the middle of September.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

628. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education if she has issued guidance in relation to awards or benefits to students for full attendance in view of the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42900/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Under the provisions of the Education

Act 1998, the Board of Management is responsible for the governance of a school. The Board has overall responsibility for school policies including responsibility for encouraging regular school attendance. My Department has provided guidance to schools in relation to the recording and reporting of COVID-19 related absences.

The Education Welfare Services of the Child and Family Agency (TUSLA) promotes school attendance and provides education welfare services to support and monitor children's attendance, participation and retention in education.

The Education Welfare Service (EWS) published "Developing the Statement of Strategy for School Attendance: Guidelines for schools" which is aimed at promoting and supporting school attendance and includes provision for rewarding students with good school attendance records. This publication is available at [https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/FINAL\\_SAS\\_strategy\\_eng\\_2jun.pdf](https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/FINAL_SAS_strategy_eng_2jun.pdf).

### **Schools Building Projects**

629. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the status of the permanent site location for a school (details supplied); her plans for a temporary site for the 2022-2023 academic year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42901/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Following an extensive site identification and assessment exercise, to identify a permanent site location for Gaelscoil Laighean, agreement in principle has been reached with the executive of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, to bring forward to the Elected Members of the Council the transfer of land at the old Mount Anville Depot, Mount Merrion to the Department for the development of a school to accommodate Gaelscoil Laighean.

This site is very well located to serve the Boosterstown Blackrock School Planning Area, which Gaelscoil Laighean was established to serve, and includes the areas of Booterstown, Blackrock, Mount Merrion, Roebuck, Farranboley & Clonskeagh.

The land transfer is subject to agreement on site valuation, contract and the statutory approval of the Council. The site will transfer in line with DPER circular 11/2015 which is the protocol which applies for the transfer of State property between State bodies.

The process of exploring suitable alternative interim accommodation for the school to which the Deputy refers for the 2022/23 academic year will commence shortly. The school patron and school authority will be kept updated in this regard.

### **Schools Building Projects**

630. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the status of the building for a school (details supplied); the status of the request for additional information supplied by her Department; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42902/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The building project for the school referred to by the Deputy is being delivered under my Department's Design and Build Programme. This delivery programme uses a professional external Project Management team to progress the project through the stages of architectural planning, tendering and construction.

An application for Planning Permission in respect of the works was submitted to the rel-

evant Local Authority in March 2021. A Request for Further Information (RFI) was received in May 2021.

My Department's Design and Build Project Management team are actively working on this RFI and a response will be issued as soon as possible.

### **School Facilities**

631. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the support being provided to a school (details supplied) given the difficulties it is facing with enrolment due to the lack of certainty on the school building; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42904/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Officials in the Department are currently in negotiations with a state body regarding the acquisition of a site in their ownership. This site is intended to be the permanent location for Sallynoggin ETNS. Due to commercial sensitivities relating to site acquisitions generally it is not possible to provide further details at this time. The patron body will be informed of the location for the school as soon as it is possible to do so.

The process of exploring suitable alternative interim accommodation for the school to which the Deputy refers for the 2022/23 academic year will commence shortly. The school patron and school authority will be kept updated in this regard.

### **Departmental Functions**

632. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the status of a representation (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42905/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The correspondence the Deputy refers to is being considered by officials in my Department and a response will be issued shortly.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

633. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education if her Department plans to implement a system of lateral flow testing specifically for the protection of teachers from Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42908/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Department of Education is working with the HSE Testing Pathways Working Group which is examining the use of antigen testing in education settings. A number of pilot projects are underway in childcare and third level settings in recent weeks. The approach to antigen setting in education settings, including in schools will be informed by these pilots.

The Department of Education will continue to work with the group as it is considered important that any data collected from a pilot of antigen testing within the wider education sector is available to inform decisions on the appropriateness of more widespread deployment of such tests within the schools sector and the potential to scale to the sector.

The Department has an ongoing close working relationship with the Department of Health and the HSE throughout the period of the pandemic in the context of implementing important

infection prevention control measures in schools to ensure that they can operate safely.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

634. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the number of CO2 monitors which have been delivered to schools; the number left to deliver; the deadline for delivery; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42912/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Managing ventilation is just one of a suite of public health measures in place to keep our schools safe. Updated guidance for schools on Practical Steps for the Deployment of Good Ventilation Practices in Schools was provided at the end of May following the work of an expert group that carefully considered the role of ventilation in managing COVID-19.

A copy of the guidance is published at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ad236-guidance-on-ventilation-in-schools/>.

The over-arching approach in the guidance is for schools to have windows open as fully as possible when classrooms are not in use (e.g. during break-times or lunch-times and also at the end of each school day) and partially open when classrooms are in use.

The guidance outlines that Carbon Dioxide (CO2) monitors can play a part in providing a useful general indication that areas/rooms may not be adequately ventilated. They can enable occupants to become familiar with the impacts of activities, outdoor weather and window openings on levels of good ventilation.

The Department procured a number of portable monitors that are being distributed to schools in August and September – between 2 and 20 at primary level and between 20 and 35 at post-primary level depending on school size at an estimated overall cost of €4 million. This will ensure that a CO2 monitor will be available for use in every classroom in Ireland. The monitors are portable, simple to use, and will give a digital reading. The provision of portable CO2 monitors provides schools with the flexibility to focus their use to those rooms where most beneficial to inform strategies for optimising ventilation in the school.

Deliveries of CO2 monitors to schools commenced in the third week of August and are expected to be completed by mid-September. In total, it involves over 35,000 CO2 monitors being distributed to , primary and post-primary schools in the Free Scheme and schools approved on the basis of their application in the Fee Charging sector.

Smaller sized schools will receive their full allocation in one delivery, with medium and larger sized schools receiving two deliveries. This approach maximises the number of schools that are provided with monitors as early as possible.

The target remains to have all monitors delivered by the middle of September.

### **Government Communications**

635. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if her Ministerial phones have been hacked or attempted to be hacked during the term of office. [42921/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** There are no records indicating that my Ministerial mobile phone nor the Ministerial mobile phone of my colleague Josepha Madigan

TD was hacked.

### Government Communications

636. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if she has ever used her personal phones for Government business; and if so, if the personal phones have been hacked during her term of office. [42939/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm to the Deputy that my Department has issued me with a mobile phone. However, I also have a personal phone which I also use on occasion. I am not aware of my personal phone having been hacked during my term of office.

### Schools Building Projects

637. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the status of progress on the building of a permanent school building for a school (details supplied); if a suitable site has been identified for the building; and the timeframe for completion of the build. [42957/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm that a permanent site option for the school referred to by the Deputy has been identified. Due to the sensitive nature of site acquisitions in general, it is not possible to give further details at this time.

It is difficult to indicate a timeframe for any site acquisition as each process is unique and in some instances complex issues can arise which may cause delays.

Nevertheless, the Department is committed to delivering a permanent site for the school referred to and are treating this as a priority.

### Freedom of Information

638. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Education the number of freedom of information requests responded to by her Department in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; the number of responses that included documents related to text messages and other phone message communications such as messages sent through an application (details supplied) in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42961/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department reports annually to both the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the Office of the Information Commissioner on Freedom of Information activity. The Office of the Information Commissioner publish this data in its annual report and the annual reports up to 2020 are available on the OIC's website.

The following table provides the total number of requests received and processed by my Department for the years 2016 through to 2021.

Year	Total FOI
2021 ytd	366
2020	558
2019	505

Year	Total FOI
2018	568
2017	548
2016	494

As to the number of responses that include documents related to phone message communications, the eFOI system does not allow for the bulk examination of the thousands of records released under the FOI Act.

My Department routinely publishes FOI Disclosure Logs containing summary information on non-personal FOI requests processed and these logs can be accessed via our website.

### Commissions of Investigation

639. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Education the cost of each commission of investigation under the remit of her Department over the preceding decade. [42990/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** There have been no commissions of investigation, established under the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004, under the remit of the Department of Education over the past decade.

The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse was established in 1999 and was subsequently put on a statutory basis under the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Act, 2000.

The overall cost of the Commission paid by the Department of Education since inception is €84 million.

The overall cost per year over the past decade is outlined in the table below:

Year	Total €
2011	2,172,803.13
2012	1,295,522.87
2013	2,815,834.08
2014	7,167,973.52
2015	1,290,119.43
2016	730,491.82
2017	880,322.41
2018	688,892.77
2019	1,433,025.04
2020	597,605.63
TOTAL	19,072,590.70

### School Staff

640. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education if the case of a school (details supplied) will be examined; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43016/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The NCSE has responsibility for planning and coordinating school supports for children with special educational needs including the allocation of SNAs and reviews.

The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme is designed to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs. Such support is provided in order to facilitate the attendance of those pupils at school and also to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills.

SNAs are not allocated to individual children but to schools as a school based resource. The deployment of SNAs within schools is a matter for the individual Principal/Board of Management of the school. SNAs should be deployed by the school in a manner which best meets the care support requirements of the children enrolled in the school for whom SNA support has been allocated.

It is a matter for schools to allocate support as required, and on the basis of individual need, which allows schools flexibility in how the SNA support is utilised.

In light of the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the introduction of the new Frontloaded Allocation Model for SNAs for students in mainstream classes in primary and post-primary schools is to be deferred for a further year to the beginning of the 2022/23 school year.

In order to minimise disruption for schools, in the current circumstances, and to provide for continuity of allocations the following arrangements for the allocation of Special Needs Assistants for mainstream classes for the 2021/22 school year:

- Existing mainstream class SNA allocations in schools on 30 April 2021 will be maintained and will automatically rollover into the 2021/22 school year.

- No school will therefore receive an allocation less than that which they had on 30 April 2021.

- SNAs currently in mainstream settings can continue in post for the next school year in the normal way.

- Priority consideration will now be given by the NCSE to applications for increased support for the 2021/22 school year, in particular, applications from schools with no SNAs and developing schools will be prioritised. Determinations will be made before 30 June. Other applications will be processed in order of date received.

- As in previous years, where circumstances change during the course of the 2021/22 school year that materially increase the level of care need in a school to the extent that the school can clearly demonstrate that it cannot be met within the existing SNA allocation, the school may apply to the NCSE for a review. Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website <https://ncse.ie/for-schools>

The NCSE have published the SNA allocations on their website [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

SNA allocations for special classes and special schools are not affected by this arrangement.

Circular 0029/2021 has been published and advises schools of the arrangements for the allocation of SNAs for the 2021/22 school year.

Provisions set out in Circular 0030/2020 has been extended for the 2021/22 school year.

Circulars 29/2021 and 30/2020 are available on the Departments website.

My Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations. Accordingly your correspondence has been forwarded to the NCSE for direct reply.

## **Departmental Policies**

641. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Education the circulars that have been issued to schools which give guidance on reopening after the summer holidays; if any guidance has been given to schools not to engage in practices which incentivise a full attendance in class for the 2021-2022 academic year; her views on such incentives; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43022/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** It is a key objective of the Government's plan for living with COVID-19 (Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19) that our children and school staff can attend school safely. Plans were put in place to support the full reopening of schools in time for the start of the new school year at the end of August/ start of September 2021.

My Department wrote to all schools highlighting the guidance and resources provided to support schools as they reopen for the next school year and as we continue to live with COVID-19. The Department is very conscious that schools need to be clear on the arrangements and guidance that remain in place for the 2021/22 academic year to support schools during COVID-19.

Each school is required to have a COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe operation through the prevention, early detection and control of COVID-19 in line with public health advice. This guidance is focused on the practical steps schools must take to minimise the risk of transmission of infection, including physical distancing measures and reducing the risk of congregation of students. It is a matter for each individual school to implement these measures locally taking into account its individual circumstances such as school layout.

## **School Staff**

642. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Education the progress to date in finalising the pay and conditions for school secretaries and caretakers; if the finalisation of these issues will be expedited; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43052/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Department is aware of the vitally important role played by school secretaries and caretakers in the running of our schools.

In recognition of this role, special COVID-19 working arrangements were put in place and the Employee Assistance Service was extended to grant funded staff. The Department also previously fully implemented and funded the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator for a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim and officials from the Department and school management bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the issues. A process of engagement has taken place at the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) and an understanding has been agreed on a pathway to progress the issues with a phased approach being taken to the development of proposals.

The Department is actively seeking to engage with Fórsa in an effort to resolve the issue as part of an ongoing IR process under the auspices of the WRC. Industrial action would impact on the day-to-day operation of schools at a time when so much effort has gone into ensuring

they could open and stay open during the pandemic. The Department would appeal to school secretaries and to Fórsa to defer this planned action to allow further early and intensive discussions to take place.

### School Transport

643. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Education if she will provide transport for a person (details supplied) with an intellectual disability to attend a school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43056/21]

**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 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, were transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

Under the terms of my Department's School Transport Scheme for Children with Special Educational Needs, children are eligible for school transport where they have special educational needs arising from a diagnosed disability and are attending the nearest recognised school/class that is resourced to meet their special educational needs. Eligibility is determined following consultation with the National Council for Special Education through its network of Special Education Needs Organisers.

Bus Éireann has confirmed that the pupil referred to by Deputy availed of a service under the School Transport Scheme for children with Special Education Needs up to the end of the 2020/21 school year while they attended the school referred to by the Deputy.

School Transport Section understands that the pupil is no longer attending the above referenced school as a post primary school pupil.

Special Schools funded by my Department are intended to cater for children and young persons with special educational needs from 4 years until the end of the school year in which they reach their 18th year. At that point, the Department of Health/Health Service Executive assumes direct responsibility for young adults with special educational needs who are over 18 years.

If the family has any further queries on this matter they can contact the School Transport Section of my Department directly.

### Ministerial Appointments

644. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education the number of formal and informal roles held by a person (details supplied) in the name of her Department or associated agency in the lifetime of this Government; when they were appointed to same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43064/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm to the Deputy that the person referred to in the Deputy's question was not engaged by my Department or any of the bodies under the aegis of my Department during the term of the current Government.

### Government Communications

645. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if she and or her special advisers and or officials use or have used services (details supplied) to communicate in the past 18 months. [43068/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm to the Deputy that my Department does not provide access for staff to either of the services specified in her question and that neither I nor my special advisers have used the services referred to by the Deputy for official purposes.

### **School Funding**

646. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education her advice on a matter (details supplied) in relation to the lack of funding for primary schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43170/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Under the Programme for Government there is a commitment to make further progress in reducing the pupil teacher ratios in primary schools and supporting small schools.

As part of the Budget 2021 measures, the Government have sought to deliver on this commitment by the announcement of a 1 point change to the primary staffing schedule and the introduction of a three point reduction in the number of pupils needed to retain a teacher. For the 2021/22 school year the staffing schedule will be on the basis of 1 teacher for every 25 pupils.

The latest figures in relation to pupil teacher ratio shows an improved ratio of teachers to students from 16:1 to 14.5:1 at primary level when comparing the 2015/16 school year to the 2020/21 school year. Average class sizes improved from 24.9 to 23.3 in the same period. The most recent budget announcement will continue the positive trend of improving class sizes.

The staffing schedule which now stands at a new historical low will help ensure better teacher retention in primary schools while also ensuring that less pupils are required to retain or recruit a teacher.

As part of the supports provided under The Roadmap for the Full Return to School in 2020, specific funding was provided to support Principals who undertake teaching duties in primary schools. This funding provided each teaching principal with a minimum of one release day per week. Schools have been advised that, in the context of COVID-19, the additional allocation of Principal Release Days outlined in Circular 45/2020, “COVID-19 Operational Supports for the Full Return to School” will remain in place for the 2021/22 school year and each school with a teaching principal will have 37 Principal Release Days.

In total 1700 additional leadership posts have been invested in our primary schools since the lifting of the moratorium on posts of responsibility in 2017, which has led to 1 in 3 teachers now holding promoted positions. The Department has committed to annually revising the allocation of Posts of Responsibility to take into account retirements during the school year which ensures that the current level of Posts of Responsibility are maintained in the school system. The most recent update for the current school year is available on the Department’s website (Circular 0025/2021). This recognises the key role school leadership has in promoting a school environment which is welcoming, inclusive and accountable.

The Substitute Teacher Supply Panel was expanded last year, from a pilot scheme consisting of 6 base schools to 132 Substitute Teacher Supply Panels nationwide, with almost 380 newly appointed Supply Panel teachers employed, providing substitute cover to over 2,500 schools

across the country. Primary schools have been informed that the Supply Panel Scheme will continue for the 2021/22 school year.

I understand the need for improved capitation funding and I am pleased that Budget 2020 has been able to provide for a further 2.5% increase in standard capitation funding for primary schools that applied from the start of the 2020/21 school year. This builds on the 5% increase in capitation announced in Budget 2019.

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

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

*Question No. 647 answered with Question No. 523.*

### **School Staff**

648. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Education the progress to date in finalising the pay and conditions for school secretaries and caretakers; the timeline for the finalisation of these issues; the current position regarding negotiations with a union (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43189/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Department is aware of the vitally important role played by school secretaries and caretakers in the running of our schools.

In recognition of this role, special COVID-19 working arrangements were put in place and the Employee Assistance Service was extended to grant funded staff. The Department also previously fully implemented and funded the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator for a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim and officials from the Department and school management bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the issues. A process of engagement has taken place at the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) and an understanding has been agreed on a pathway to progress the issues with a phased approach being taken to the development of proposals.

The Department is actively seeking to engage with Fórsa in an effort to resolve the issue as part of an ongoing IR process under the auspices of the WRC. Industrial action would impact on the day-to-day operation of schools at a time when so much effort has gone into ensuring they could open and stay open during the pandemic. The Department would appeal to school secretaries and to Fórsa to defer this planned action to allow further early and intensive discussions to take place.

### **Departmental Functions**

649. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Education if she will address the concerns raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43194/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Under the Teaching Council Acts 2001-

2015 the Teaching Council is the body with the statutory authority and responsibility for the regulation of the teaching profession in Ireland including the registration of teachers in the State.

It is a function of the Council under the Teaching Council Acts (s7(2)) to act as the competent authority for recognition of qualifications obtained by a person who has applied under this Act for registration as a teacher. In accordance with the EU Directive 2005/36/EC, the qualifications of teachers who qualified outside of the ROI are assessed to ensure they are of a comparable standard to those achieved by graduates of accredited programmes in Ireland.

The person referred to by the Deputy should continue to liaise directly with the Teaching Council and follow their guidance regarding their registration.

### **Employment Support Services**

650. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will address a matter (details supplied) regarding schemes under the remit of her Department; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41425/21]

686. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her attention has been drawn to concerns raised by the Local Employment Services Network regarding the new Pathway to Work Strategy; if she will meet the group to discuss its concerns; if her attention has been drawn to concerns in relation to the payment by results model; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42135/21]

688. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will give urgent attention to serious matters of concern raised by a community organisation (details supplied) in Dublin 9; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42173/21]

705. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection her views on a matter regarding jobs clubs (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42439/21]

706. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection her views on correspondence (details supplied) in respect of the future of local employment services; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42441/21]

712. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will engage with the local employment services and job clubs and their staff representatives on the future of the sector; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42590/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 650, 686, 688, 705, 706 and 712 together.

Following on from a review of public employment services in my Department, my officials have commenced a series of procurement exercises to secure appropriate services to engage with the long-term unemployed and other cohorts throughout the State consistent with the new Pathways to Work 2021-2025 strategy.

The focus throughout this exercise is the customer, their needs and how they can be met through customer-centric services delivering the necessary supports in their journey to employment. My Department is conscious of the need to have supports in place at the time that the customer needs them and to be able to respond rapidly to changes in the labour market and the demand for services.

The procurement process was preceded by extensive engagement both at Ministerial and official level and all stakeholders were given the opportunity to share their views and suggestions on the Department's plans to procure quality employment services in an open and competitive manner. At my instruction Departmental officials are continuing to engage with the relevant stakeholders including the ILDN, non ILDN service providers and employee representatives.

Phase one of the process, involving the procurement of a Regional Employment Service for four lots over seven counties in the Midlands and North-East - areas currently without a local employment service - is at an advanced stage. Phase two will follow in due course with the aim of having services in place for early 2022.

I am committed to ensuring my Department incorporates the lessons learned in the first phase of procurement and engages once more with a broad range of stakeholders prior to the commencement of the phase 2 procurement. Any learnings from phase 1 will be incorporated into phase 2 to ensure there are no barriers to the participation of the community and voluntary sector.

Nonetheless, the legal requirement to hold competitive tenders for future employment services remains and the procurement model will update decades-old contracts in line with procurement regulations.

The design of the request for tender for the Regional Employment Service, places significant value on an organisations ability to deliver a wide range of services locally through a range of other service providers and has been developed to ensure it is accessible to tenders from the community and voluntary sector, giving due regard to their experience and competencies.

### **Social Welfare Payments**

651. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason a person (details supplied) has had their disability allowance reduced when they got married and is now relying on their spouse to support them financially; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41466/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I am advised by the Social Welfare Appeals Office that an Appeals Officer, having fully considered all the evidence, disallowed the disability allowance appeal of the person concerned by way of summary decision on 2 October 2020. The question before the Appeals Officer was whether the appellant's weekly means, which were based on his spouse's earnings from employment, had been correctly assessed, in line with the governing legislation.

A decision of an Appeals Officer is generally final. However, under social welfare legislation an Appeals Officer may revise his or her decision where it appears to him or her that the decision was erroneous in the light of new evidence or new facts which have been subsequently brought to his or her notice.

I am advised that the person concerned subsequently submitted additional evidence and that the Appeals Officer reviewed the appeal decision on foot of this additional evidence. The Appeals Officer did not find any new facts or fresh evidence which warranted a revision of the decision. The person concerned was notified of this on 18 December 2020.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

652. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a person (details supplied) will receive a conclusive response to their application for a disability allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41467/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I can confirm that an application from the person concerned for disability allowance (DA) was received by the Department on 8 March 2021. The application was referred to a Social Welfare Inspector (SWI) for a report on the person's means and circumstances.

On 3 August 2021 a letter issued to the person concerned informing them that their application for DA was withdrawn as they had been awarded invalidity pension (INVP) at a higher rate of payment.

An application for INVP was received from the person concerned on the 29 March 2021. He was awarded INVP with effect from 11 March 2021, backdated to the first payment date after receipt of the DA application. The first payment issued to his nominated bank account on the 12 August 2021.

Any arrears due (less any overlapping social welfare payment) issued in the weeks after the first payment date. The person in question was notified of this decision on the 03 August 2021.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### **Employment Support Services**

653. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Social Protection the basis for Turas Nua keeping files open on persons after they begin full-time employment even in cases in which persons have taken-up employment in circumstances (details supplied); her views on whether a person who had minimum to no engagement with Turas Nua should be on file for a year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41516/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Turas Nua is contracted by my Department to provide employment assistance and advice to jobseekers who are long-term unemployed. Participants receive intensive individual support for a period of 52 weeks, to help overcome barriers to employment and to assist in finding full-time, sustainable employment.

In the event that a jobseeker secures full time employment during the engagement period, the provider is required to offer in-employment support to that person. This includes scheduled contact with the person as well as ad-hoc contact, for example to address a need for immediate support or advice. As part of the service, this support is provided for 52 weeks from the time the employment commences.

The person is not required to attend any meetings with the JobPath provider during this time, and is not under any obligation to provide employment or employer details but, if they wish to do so, and avail of the in-employment support offered, all information will be treated as confidential.

In circumstances where a JobPath client who has secured employment subsequently loses

that position within the original 52 week engagement, the service supports will resume and continue for the remainder of that period.

My Department is very aware of the need to have robust data protection policies, procedures and structures in place in line with current data protection legislation. The contracts with the JobPath providers are in compliance with all relevant legislation and any information shared is contractually based and necessary to provide the service. These contracts are governed by and construed in accordance with the laws of Ireland.

### **Social Welfare Payments**

654. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will examine the case of a couple (details supplied) who have been without their pension due to an administrative error; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41517/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The issue referred to by the Deputy arose as the person concerned changed financial institution but did not notify the Department of the change in a timely manner. The matter has since been resolved, and arrears of pension for the period from 2 July 2021 to 29 July 2021 have been paid to the person concerned.

My Department contacted the person concerned on 6 July 2021 when their weekly electronic fund transfer (EFT) for 2 July 2021 could not be lodged to their account and was returned by their financial institution. A letter dated 5 July 2021 was subsequently received, requesting a change of payment method, but this letter was not signed by the customer.

The person was contacted on 8 July 2021 to submit a signed mandate for their change of payment method. This information was received on 26 July 2021 and the person's payment method was updated. They were notified accordingly in writing on 27 July 2021, and advised of the amount of arrears issued. Weekly pension payments have resumed from 30 July 2021.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Departmental Schemes**

655. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection the vetting procedure that is carried out on positions submitted by an employer to the work placement experience programme before it is advertised publicly; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41532/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Work Placement Experience Programme (WPEP) is a key policy initiative under the Government's new national employment services strategy; Pathways to Work 2021-2025. This sets out the national framework for activation and employment supports to assist persons, whose employment has been adversely affected by COVID, back to work while continuing to support those who were unemployed pre-pandemic find jobs.

The Pathways strategy sets out an ambitious plan for investment in a range of training, education, skill development, work placement schemes, recruitment subsidies and jobs search. This includes 50,000 additional places in the further education and training sector, expanding the number of apprenticeships, increasing the capacity of the public employment service to provide employment support to more unemployed persons, 3,000 additional places on employ-

ment programmes such as Community Employment, as well as 10,000 places on this new work placement scheme (WPEP).

WPEP is a funded work placement scheme to provide work experience for 10,000 jobseekers who have been unemployed for more than six months, including time spent on the pandemic unemployment payment (PUP). Participation on WPEP is entirely voluntary. All participants are paid €306 per week plus any social welfare increases for qualified adults and children. The intention is to provide quality and valuable work experience to unemployed persons. Work placements are recognised internationally as being effective in assisting jobseekers find new jobs. The Labour Market Advisory Council also recommended the inclusion of a new work placement programme as one of the active labour market measures to be included in the Pathways to Work Strategy.

All WPEP placements are advertised on the Department's online recruitment service website; jobsIreland.ie. All host organisations and individual placements are vetted for compliance and quality assurance purposes prior to being listed on jobsireland.ie to ensure that each placement provides quality work experience and training opportunities for jobseekers.

In advance of advertising any placement opportunity, host organisations' tax compliance is verified by the Department. Host organisation must have appropriate insurance and health and safety measures in place and accept the terms and conditions of the programme.

The scope of the work experience on offer for each placement is reviewed in advance to ensure that it is in line with the objectives of the programme. In addition, placements must provide training opportunities, including workplace training and accredited training as part of the programme. Options include a new accredited work placement award which will be delivered by the Education and Training Boards at levels 3, 4 and 5. The provision of training to participants, is a pre-condition for host organisations to participate on the scheme. All host organisation must also demonstrate that they can provide supervision and mentoring to participants.

All the above are checked as part of the vetting process. Where the above requirements are not satisfied then the placement is not approved nor advertised on jobsireland.ie.

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Schemes**

656. **Deputy Dessie Ellis** asked the Minister for Social Protection the criteria for qualifying for the short-term enterprise allowance; if previous experience in Ireland or abroad disqualifies persons from qualifying for the allowance; if an applicant can appeal a decision should their application for the allowance be rejected; if so, the grounds on which an appeal can be made; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41534/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Short Term Enterprise Allowance (STEA) Scheme is designed to provide support for someone who loses their job and qualifies for Jobseeker's Benefit and starts up a new business.

The scheme offers support to the setting up of a new enterprise not currently in operation and is expected to be tradable and tangible. Where a proposed new business is similar to a previous business venture already undertaken, a person will be required to establish why the proposal is deemed a new business and not a recommencement of the prior venture. Each case is determined on its own merits and previous experiences, including those outside the country, may be considered as appropriate. The STEA is an administrative scheme and a customer who

is not satisfied with a recommendation may request a review by the Department within 21 days. The request must clearly state the basis of the review, enclosing any new evidence or any other information that may support their request.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Payments**

657. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of an appeal for an invalidity pension in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41550/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I am advised by the Social Welfare Appeals Office that an Appeals Officer, having fully considered all of the available evidence, decided to disallow the appeal of the person concerned by way of a summary decision on 26 January 2021.

A decision of an Appeals Officer is generally final apart from in some limited circumstances. Social welfare legislation allows an Appeals Officer to revise his or her decision where it appears to him or her that the decision was erroneous in the light of new evidence or new facts which have been subsequently brought to his or her notice.

I am advised that the person concerned subsequently submitted additional evidence and that the Appeals Officer reviewed the appeal on foot of this additional evidence. The Appeals Officer did not find any new facts or evidence which warranted a revision of her earlier decision. The person concerned was notified of the Appeals Officer's decision on 19 August 2021.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Departmental Staff**

658. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Social Protection the current policy regarding the employment of persons with disabilities in her Department and in each State and semi-State body under the aegis of her Department; the disability quota of her Department at present; if there is an active campaign to increase the disability workforce from the current target of 3% to a minimum of 6% by 2024; if this quota has now been exceeded; if so, the details of same; if there has been an advertised competition in relation to the quota; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41601/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Department works to comply with its obligations in relation to the Disability Act 2005 and reports its status, in respect of individuals with disabilities, to the National Disability Authority each year. The current disability quota for the Department of Social Protection, The Pension Authority and Citizens Information Board is 3%. It is the intention of each body to achieve or maintain a target of 6% by 2024. The disability status for the end of 2020 is present in the below table.

Organisation	Total Staff	Staff with Disclosed Disability	Percentage of total
Department of Social Protection	6715	386	5.75%
Citizens Information Board	95	11	11.58%
Pensions Authority	86	8	9.30%

### **Department of Social Protection**

The Department of Social Protection continues to provide supports and adaptations in the workplace for individuals with disabilities. The Department has a dedicated Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) which has recently been incorporated into the newly formed HR Equality Diversity & Inclusion Unit (ED&I). The DLO provides supports to people with disabilities including arranging for workplace adaptations to both existing employees and new entrants. In addition to this, the ED&I Unit regularly organise awareness and educational events such as webinars accessible to all Department staff.

Disability is an integral part of the Department's Equality, Diversity & Inclusion policy. This is highlighted, in the context of the Department's commitment to the employment of individuals with disabilities, on the Department's public website. Under the Department's employee 'Engagement and Innovation' initiative, a dedicated working group was set up in 2020 in the area of 'Supports for Staff with Disabilities in DSP'. In accordance with the structure of this employee engagement programme, this collaborative group is represented across the grades in the Department, from trade unions, policy areas and staff with disabilities.

Recruitment for the Department is conducted by the Public Appointments Service (PAS). PAS are committed to ensuring that all competitions held are accessible to individuals who require adaptations or adjustments. The Department annually participates in the Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) Programme and the Department's HR area are currently in the process of exploring participation in the Oireachtas Work Learning (OWL) Programme, which may increase the Department's direct recruitment of individuals with disabilities and provide access to development and employment opportunities within DSP.

### **Citizens Information Board**

The Citizens Information Board (CIB) is committed to the ongoing improvement of services to people with disabilities. Robust policies and procedures are in place within CIB to ensure current staff with a disability are supported with all supports, which are reasonably expected to be provided by the employer. Since 2019 CIB has extended the reach of all job vacancy advertising involving 13 local and national services working with minority groups including those specifically working with people with disabilities. Every new vacancy is distributed to these agencies with a dedicated point of contact named should they wish to be provided with more detail. Wording on all recruitment advertising and materials has been expanded highlighting CIB not only as an equal opportunities employer but spelling out how it encourages applications from all candidates regardless of race, colour, disability, marital status, family status, gender, religion, sexual orientation, membership of travelling community.

CIB have also developed a new Diversity and Inclusion Policy, highlighting to all staff CIB's commitment to everyone employed by CIB. Flexi time arrangements have been put in place for staff with disabilities who find it difficult to travel to and from work during peak times, Occupational Health services and employee assistance services are utilised to support any of our staff with disabilities.

All current employees have attended dedicated workshops on dignity at work. Staff who sit on interview panels have had upskilling on interview techniques in advance for interviews and CIB are currently in the planning stage of an organisation-wide rollout of workshops on Dis-

ability Awareness. As part of CIB's Corporate Social Responsibility programme each quarter of the year is dedicated to raising awareness of supports for all staff, October to December 2021 has already been confirmed as the quarter that is dedicated to raising awareness of people with disabilities in line with December being Disability awareness month.

### **The Pensions Authority**

The Pensions Authority is supportive of both applications to vacancies from candidates who may have disabilities and employment of individuals who may have disabilities. Furthermore, the Pensions Authority implements reasonable adjustments for current employees where they are identified/requested or if an applicant to a vacancy requires one e.g., a sign language interpreter during the interview process.

### **Social Welfare Payments**

659. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a weekly payment will be backdated in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41609/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The person concerned was awarded a Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) payment with effect from 08/07/2021. Arrears of €1,005 backdated to 02/06/2021 were paid to the person concerned on 28/07/2021.

According to the records of my Department, the person concerned subsequently closed his SWA claim following his return to work.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

660. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will address the unfair situation in which parents of children with disabilities and in receipt of a disability payment are excluded from the back to school clothing and footwear allowance and either allow parents to continue to collect the allowance or allow children in receipt of a disability payment apply for it independently; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41654/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The back to school clothing and footwear allowance (BSCFA) scheme provides a once-off payment to eligible families to assist with the costs of clothing and footwear when children start or return to school each autumn. The scheme operates from June to September each year.

The allowance is payable in respect of eligible children between the ages of 4 and 17 in respect of whom a qualified child allowance is being paid and eligible children between the ages of 18 and 22 who are in full-time second level education and in respect of whom a qualified child allowance is being paid.

To qualify for BSCFA, a person must meet a number of conditions namely:

\* The child must meet the age criteria.

\* The applicant must be in receipt of a qualifying payment and getting an increase in that payment for the qualified child (except in certain circumstances) in the period 1 June to 30

September.

\* The assessable income for the household must be within prescribed limits.

\* The applicant and the child (or children) in respect of whom the allowance is claimed must be resident in the State.

Parents whose children are in receipt of social protection payments in their own right, will not receive an increase in their weekly social protection payment for those children and so do not qualify for the BSCFA payment.

There are no current plans to amend the eligibility criteria for BSCFA. Any changes to the scheme would have to be considered in a budgetary context and within the scope of the overall resources available for welfare improvements.

Applications which are outside the terms of the BSCFA scheme will not qualify for payment under the BSCFA scheme. However, individuals who are refused a BSCFA payment may be considered for exceptional needs payments (ENP) under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme by the officers administering this scheme in the normal way.

Any persons who consider that they have an entitlement to an exceptional needs payment should contact the Department's Community Welfare Service.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

661. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a person (details supplied) qualifies for the living alone allowance given that the person has a UK pension; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41658/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Living Alone Increase is an additional weekly payment to social welfare recipients who are living alone and who are on a qualifying payment, including State pensions, from my Department. It is not a stand-alone payment and as a result is not payable where the person concerned is in receipt of a UK pension.

Depending on their circumstances, the person concerned may wish to consider applying for State pension (non-contributory). This is a means-tested, residency-based payment for people aged 66 and over, who do not qualify for State pension (contributory), or who only qualify for a reduced rate contributory pension based on their social insurance record. The current statutory limit for the State pension (non-contributory) means assessment is €262.50 per week.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Freedom of Information**

662. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of occasions since 2014 her Department has refused to process a request under freedom of information using section 15(1)(g) of the Act; and the number of persons this has applied to since January 2014. [41662/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The total number of requests under the Freedom of Information Acts received in the period from 2014 to date in 2021

is 16,810.

The number of requests refused under Section 15(1)(g) of the Freedom of Information Act 2014 in each year from 2014 to 2021 is set out in the following table.

Year	Number of FOI Requests	Number of FOI requests refused under Section 15(1)(g)	Number of persons refused under Section 15(1)(g)
2014	2,193	2	2
2015	2,156	0	0
2016	2,089	1	1
2017	2,443	29	1
2018	2,510	221	78
2019	2,614	8	2
2020	1,706	3	2
2021 (to date)	1,099	0	0
TOTAL	16,810	256	86

### Community Employment Schemes

663. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection the actions taken with regard to commitments made to community employment supervisors (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41671/21]

678. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Social Protection the position regarding finalising negotiations in respect of community employment supervisor pensions and gratuity; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42002/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 663 and 678 together.

As the Deputies will be aware, CE supervisors and CE assistant supervisors have been seeking for several years, through their union representatives, the allocation of Exchequer funding to implement a 2008 Labour Court recommendation relating to the provision of a pension scheme for CE supervisors and assistant supervisors who are employed by CE scheme sponsors.

This claim creates some difficulties because the State is not the employer of the supervisors.

Within this context, officials from my Department and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform held discussions on proposals to progress and resolve this complex issue, while having regard to the wider budgetary framework. Department officials also held discussions with unions representing CE supervisors and CE assistant supervisors.

At the start of April this year, agreement was reached with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform on proposals to resolve the long-standing issue. These proposals include a financial package.

I am confident these proposals are a solid basis for progressing and resolving this complex issue. Discussions on these proposals are ongoing between my Department and the unions representing CE supervisors and CE assistant supervisors. The unions have made a number of observations, and these are now being examined by my officials in conjunction with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. There is also continuing contact between officials and unions representing the CE supervisors and assistant supervisors.

My officials are continuing to progress this matter as a priority, and I would hope that these discussions can reach a conclusion in the near future.

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputies.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

664. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in the determination of an appeal in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41721/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** An application for job-seeker's allowance by the person concerned was disallowed by a Deciding Officer of the Department on 10 February 2020. In the normal course, an appeal against the decision of a Deciding Officer must be made within 21 days of a decision being notified. I am informed that the person concerned did not submit an appeal within that timeframe and that no appeal from the person concerned was received in the Social Welfare Appeals Office until 14 July 2020.

Appeals received outside of the 21 day time limit may be accepted at the discretion of the Chief Appeals Officer.

In view of the length of time which elapsed between when the person concerned was notified of the decision and their submitting an appeal, the absence of any explanation, to date, for the failure to submit an appeal within the prescribed timeframe and their failure to submit grounds of appeal, I am advised by the Social Welfare Appeals Office that an appeal was not registered in this case.

Following receipt of PQ 38216/20 from the Deputy in November 2020, I am informed that the Appeals Office sought the grounds of appeal and an explanation for the failure to submit an appeal within the prescribed timeframe on 23 November 2020. This information was never received by that Office and therefore again an appeal was not registered in this case.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Departmental Funding**

665. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated cost to increase funding to the National Advocacy Service for persons with disabilities by 10%. [41772/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The National Advocacy Service for People with Disabilities (NAS) provides an independent, confidential and free issues-based representative advocacy service that works exclusively for the person using the service. The NAS adheres to professional standards and it has a particular remit for people with disabilities who are isolated from their community and services, have communication differences, are inappropriately accommodated, live in residential services, attend day services or have limited informal or natural supports.

The Citizens Information Board (CIB), a statutory body under the aegis of the Department of Social Protection, provides funding and support to NAS, which has a mandate under the Citizens Information Act 2007 to provide advocacy for people with disabilities.

NAS Funding Allocation 2021	Full year NAS Funding Allocation (including a 10% increase)
€3,157,391	€3,473,130.1

The estimate detailed above is based on an assumption of no additional range of services provided by NAS. Figures provided do not include the Patient Advocacy Service, which is funded by the Department of Health.

### Departmental Data

666. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of passenger journeys for which her Department compensated the licensed transport operator under the free travel scheme in respect of each year from 2015 to 2020 and during the period January 2021 to June 2021 in respect of licensed routes numbers 481 and 482 and licence numbers 01019 and 99070. [41813/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The free travel scheme permits, for those eligible under the scheme, free travel on most CIE public transport services, Luas and a range of services offered by some 80 private operators countrywide. The scheme is available to all people aged over 66 and those under age 66 on qualifying payments, who are living legally and permanently in the State. At the end of July, there were 1,005,333 customers eligible for Free Travel.

The transport provider concerned was a participant in the Free Travel scheme during the periods 2015 to 2020 and from January to June 2021, for the routes specified by the Deputy, and has been paid accordingly for the carriage of Free Travel passengers.

It is not possible to provide the number of passenger journeys for the periods concerned, as requested by the Deputy, as my Department does not hold this information.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### Social Welfare Payments

667. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will consider allowing persons with certain disabilities (details supplied) to continue to receive the fuel allowance during the summer months; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41845/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Fuel Allowance is a payment of €28.00 per week for 28 weeks (a total of €784 each year) from October to April, to over 372,000 low income households, at an estimated cost of €300 million in 2021. The purpose of this payment is to assist these households with their energy costs. The allowance represents a contribution towards the energy costs of a household. It is not intended to meet those costs in full. Only one allowance is paid per household.

The Fuel Allowance is an important measure that assists pensioners and other welfare dependent householders to address income deficiency, especially during the winter when a household faces increased heating needs. The duration of the scheme is designed to coincide with the coldest periods of the year and it is for this reason the scheme runs from October to mid-April.

In Budget 2021, the Government targeted one third of carbon tax revenues to go towards boosting the incomes of the poorest in our society. Based on ESRI research, three key DSP

payments were targeted for increases in the budget as a result - the Fuel Allowance, the Qualified Child Allowance and the Living Alone Allowance. Accordingly, with effect from January 2021, I increased the Fuel Allowance by €3.50 per week to €28 for a period of 28 weeks.

While I fully understand that these are difficult times for many people, especially for the vulnerable and the elderly, any further economic measures, such as extending the 2020/21 fuel allowance season for some customers, can only be considered while taking account of the overall budgetary context and the availability of financial resources.

Under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) scheme, a Heating Supplement may be paid to assist people in certain circumstances that have special heating needs. If a recipient of a social welfare payment has exceptional heating costs due to ill health, infirmity or a medical condition which he/she is unable to meet out of household income, that person may apply for a Heating Supplement. There is no automatic entitlement to a payment. Heating Supplements are payable at the discretion of the officers administering the scheme taking into account the requirements of the legislation and all the relevant circumstances of the case in order to ensure that the payments target those most in need of assistance.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

668. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in the determination of an appeal for carer's allowance in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41890/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered with that office on 13 May 2021. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant Departmental papers and comments by the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought. These papers were received on 27 May 2021. On 15 June 2021 the appeal was referred to an Appeals Officer who will make a summary decision on the appeal based on the documentary evidence presented or, if necessary, hold an oral hearing. Hearings are currently being conducted online or by telephone. Due to the current level of Covid-19 restrictions in-person oral appeal hearings have been suspended.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

669. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in the determination of an application for an invalidity pension in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41891/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Invalidity pension (IP) is a payment for people who are permanently incapable of work because of illness or incapacity and for no other reason and who satisfy the pay related social insurance (PRSI) contribution conditions.

A claim for IP was received from the person concerned on 26 July 2021. In order to establish medical suitability two forms were sent to her on 28 July 2021. On receipt of the completed forms, the IP claim will be processed as quickly as possible and she will be notified directly of the outcome.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

670. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in the determination of an appeal for a disability allowance in the case of a person (details supplied); when the appeal is likely to be brought to a conclusion; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41892/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered with that office on 22 July 2021. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant Departmental papers and comments by the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought. When these papers have been received from the Department the case in question will be referred to an Appeals Officer who will make a summary decision on the appeal based on the documentary evidence presented or, if necessary, hold an oral appeal hearing. Hearings are currently being conducted online or by telephone. Due to the current level of Covid-19 restrictions in-person oral appeal hearings have been suspended.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Public Services Card**

671. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans to put applications for the public services card online; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41894/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The SAFE registration process, which my Department uses to authenticate a person's identity, is a face to face process which results in the issuing of a Public Services Card (PSC). Currently, it is not possible for someone who does not already have a PSC to acquire one without attending an in-person appointment.

My Department is exploring the delivery of services to augment the current face-to-face identity proofing processes carried out by staff in Intreo and SAFE Centres nationwide by allowing customers satisfactorily establish their identity online .

My Department has published a request for tenders (RFT) for an online document-centric identity proofing service to meet the Department's SAFE standard. A decision on the development of this service will be made following an examination of responses to this RFT.

My Department has also introduced a new online PSC renewal service which is available on MyWelfare.ie.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Public Services Card**

672. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Social Protection if having a public services card is mandatory or compulsory for applying to get social protection payments, State pension payments or a driver licence; the difference between mandatory and compulsory; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41895/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** SAFE registration is the process through which my Department authenticates the identity of an individual, in the manner described, and for the purposes set out, in the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005, as amended. The Public Services Card (PSC) is issued to a person when they have completed this process.

Since its inception in the late 1990s, the PSC has always been intended to be used as physical token of identity to be used in transactions between the citizens and the State, not just between citizens and the Department of Social Protection.

In respect of transactions with the Department of Social Protection, and as provided for in the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005, a person must authenticate their identity through SAFE registration:

1. before they can be allocated and issued a Personal Public Service Number (PPSN);
2. before they can be issued a PSC;
3. as one of the conditions of their right to a social welfare payment;
4. to continue to receive a social welfare payment below once they have been requested to satisfy the Minister as to their identity.

The requirement that a person be SAFE registered before being issued a PPSN or being awarded a social welfare payment, was temporarily suspended from March 2020, to ensure the health and safety of the Department's customers and staff.

SAFE registrations have since resumed and those customers concerned will be contacted by the Department and requested to attend for SAFE registration.

The Social Welfare Consolidation Act also provides that "A person shall produce his or her public services card at the request of a specified body for the purposes of a transaction."

All specified bodies, including the Department of Social Protection, are therefore entitled to ask a person for their PSC as proof of their identity for the purposes of a transaction; where such a request is made, there is a statutory obligation on the person to produce their PSC when requested.

The matter of when, or for what reason, another specified body, other than the Department of Social Protection, seeks production of a PSC as proof of identity is a matter for those bodies.

My role, as Minister for Social Protection, is to conduct SAFE registration and issue a PSC for the purposes of a transaction.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

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

673. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if previous recipients of the pandemic unemployment payment who have returned to work can requalify for the pandemic unemployment payment after 8 July 2021 if their employment ends; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41930/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) was an emergency measure introduced 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, expenditure on PUP is over €8.6 billion which demonstrates the Government's clear commitment to support impacted employees.

Since February the number of people who are in receipt of PUP has fallen by over 70% from over 475,000 to just over 143,000 last week. As restrictions are lifted and the economy gradually returns to normal, the need to retain this support therefore diminishes. It is important in the interests of equity and sustainability to restore standard social welfare payments.

The PUP scheme was closed for new applications on 8 July. A person who loses their employment after this date, including those who were previously in receipt of PUP, should apply for a jobseeker payment.

I trust that this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

## **Social Welfare Appeals**

674. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on a review of a decision on a disability allowance application by a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41934/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The person concerned submitted an application for disability allowance (DA) on 5 July 2021. Their application, based upon all the evidence submitted, was refused on medical grounds as it was not found that the person concerned was substantially restricted in taking up employment. She was notified in writing of this decision on 30 July 2021.

Further medical evidence was received and a review of this decision was carried out. The original decision was upheld and the person concerned was notified in writing on 6 August 2021. She was also advised of her right to appeal this decision to the independent social welfare appeals office (SWAO).

The person concerned requested an appeal of her claim for DA with the SWAO. All the relevant papers requested by that office will be prepared and submitted by this Department. The SWAO will be in touch with the person concerned in due course in relation to the progress of the appeal.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## **Social Welfare Schemes**

675. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Social Protection if persons living alone

over the age of 80 years receive an increased living alone allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41941/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Those in receipt of a primary State pension automatically receive an increase of €10 per week when they reach 80 years of age.

The Living Alone Allowance is a payment for people aged 66 years or over who are in receipt of certain social welfare payments, including State pensions, and who are living alone. It is also paid to people aged under 66 who live alone and are in receipt of Disability Allowance, Invalidity Pension, Incapacity Supplement or Blind Pension. This Living Alone Allowance is not means tested and the payment is made as an increase to the recipient's primary social welfare payment. In Budget 2021, it was increased from €14 to €19 per week.

Those pensioners who are aged 80 or above and who live alone may receive both the over 80s allowance and the living alone increase, subject to fulfilling the criteria for living alone.

They would also be eligible for secondary benefits such as the household benefits package (€35 per month plus a free television licence), the fuel allowance (€28 per week for the length of the fuel season) and the telephone support allowance (€2.50 per week).

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

676. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on a disability allowance appeal by a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41944/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered in that office on 17 August 2021.

It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant Departmental papers and comments by the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought. When these papers have been received from the Department, the case in question will be referred to an Appeals Officer who will make a summary decision on the appeal based on the documentary evidence presented or, if necessary, hold an oral appeal hearing.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

677. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the measures she is taking to promote or facilitate remote working for staff in her Department or bodies under the aegis of her Department; the costs this has generated in terms of the provision of laptops, desktop computers or contributions to wi-fi costs or phone-related expenses; the number of staff who have applied for permission to work from home on a permanent or hybrid-model basis (details

supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41960/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Civil Service departments and offices are currently working in line with Government Covid-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organization-level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas. In conjunction with this framework an application process is also currently being developed to allow staff to apply for blended working into the future.

As an essential service, staff in my Department have continued, throughout the pandemic, to work both on site in office premises and remotely to deliver for our customers. The number of staff who are working remotely at any one time is approximately 3,300 or 50% of the total staffing number and has remained relatively constant through the Covid-19 restrictions.

To support remote working my Department has put in place a health and safety self-assessment system with the necessary training, furniture and IT equipment being provided as a result of these assessments.

The additional costs generated to date, relating to furniture and accommodation for remote workers during the Covid-19 pandemic are approximately €107,000.

In relation to the costs regarding IT equipment, my Department has an overall capital allocation from which it procures all computer related hardware such as desktop computers and laptops including for remote working purposes. It is not possible to separate out the expenditure of laptops and ancillary equipment specifically for remote working purposes from the overall computer hardware expenditure which includes all hardware procured under normal business as usual arrangements. Furthermore, my Department does not make a contribution to wi-fi or personal phone costs incurred by staff. In accordance with FOI legislation with effect from January 2016, details of public contracts awarded over €25,000 are published quarterly on [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie).

The Departments HR Wellbeing Unit has developed and offered a range of online supports to staff and managers working remotely in the areas of personal and professional wellbeing. In addition, my Department's HR area have also provided supports, advice and training materials in relation to managing staff remotely and managing newly appointed staff through their probation whilst working remotely.

The position in relation to the relevant bodies under the aegis of my Department is as follows:

1. Citizens Information Board (CIB) All CIB staff members are currently working remotely. CIB has committed to developing a remote working policy in line with central arrangements.

33 laptops were provided to CIB staff at a cost of €52,800. 35 mobile phones were provided to CIB staff at a cost of €14,427 between March 2020 and August 2021. Miscellaneous equipment was also provided to CIB staff (eg monitors, keyboards) at a cost of €3,584.50. CIB does not pay contributions towards wi-fi costs for staff working at home.

As CIB does not have a long-term remote working policy at present, no applications for permanent remote working have been received.

2. Pensions Authority

All Pensions Authority employees continue to work from home pending further guidance from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform regarding a return to the office.

Where required, employees return to the office to undertake essential IT, administration and facilities management work. The Pensions Authority is currently developing its longer-term remote working policy and procedures in line with DPER guidance as it becomes available. No employees have applied to work from home permanently or from a hybrid model yet.

During 2020, 22 new employees joined the Authority. The Authority expenditure incurred across the organisation in dealing with the impact of Covid 19 was approximately €100k. Most of the increased costs relate to provide the ICT and general supports for employees required to work remotely.

*Question No. 678 answered with Question No. 663.*

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

679. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Social Protection the position in circumstances in which a person who has been on disability allowance for a number of years, is a single parent and after a long number of years the former spouse is now agreeing to pay maintenance for their child; the implications of this in terms of means testing the disability allowance; if the matter is treated separately if the payment is for the benefit of the child as opposed to the benefit of the mother; if a payment for the benefit of the child can be separated from the child's mother's disability allowance for the means test; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42005/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department operates a range of means-tested social assistance payments. Social welfare legislation provides that the means test for these payments takes account of the income and assets of the person and a spouse/partner, if applicable. Income and assets include income from employment, self-employment, occupational pensions, maintenance payments as well as property owned (other than the family home) and capital such as savings, shares and other investments.

For social assistance schemes, such as disability allowance, all maintenance payments (including maintenance payments made to or in respect of a qualified child) are assessed by first disregarding any housing costs incurred (up to €4,952 per annum or €95.23 per week), and then assessing the remainder at 50%.

Accordingly, the value of any maintenance payment is never assessed in full, resulting in a higher total income received by the family (social welfare payment and maintenance payment combined) than for someone not receiving maintenance payments..

I should mention that the Government has established a Child Maintenance Review Group to examine certain issues in relation to child maintenance in Ireland. The Group is chaired by former Circuit Court Judge Catherine Murphy and includes legal, policy and academic professionals as well as officials from my Department and the Department of Justice.

The Group's Terms of Reference are to consider and make recommendations on: (i) the current treatment of child maintenance payments in my Department; (ii) the current provisions regarding liable relatives managed by my Department; and (iii) the establishment of a Child Maintenance Agency in Ireland.

I trust this clarifies the position at this time.

## Rural Schemes

680. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she has considered the implications of the six-year rule which was introduced in 2017 that will see participants forced off the rural social scheme in 2023; if she will reconsider this rule and allow these participants continue on the scheme; if not, the alternatives her Department is proposing; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42021/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** The Rural Social Scheme (RSS) is an income support scheme providing part-time employment opportunities for farmers or fishers in receipt of certain social welfare payments, and who are underemployed in their primary occupation, within their local area, in community and voluntary organisations. RSS participants have the opportunity to improve and develop new or existing skills, while performing this valuable work in their local communities.

During 2017 and 2018 the number of places funded on RSS was increased by 750, bringing the total number of places available to 3,350. A six-year time limit was also introduced at that time for new RSS participants with effect from February 2017. Prior to the introduction of the six year time limit, an RSS participant could remain on the RSS scheme for a significant part of their working life. This had the effect of restricting the turnover of places on RSS and thereby reducing the opportunities for potential new entrants.

The Department plans to review the RSS in 2022.

## Departmental Data

681. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons in receipt of the Widow and Widowers' pension. [42039/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** There are currently 123,358 recipients of Widow's, Widower's or Surviving Civil Partner's Contributory Pension and there are 1,242 recipients of Widow's, Widower's or Surviving Civil Partner's Non Contributory Pension.

Widow's, Widower's or Surviving Civil Partner's Contributory Pension is a social insurance based payment made on the death of a spouse or civil partner. It is not means-tested so entitlement is not affected by other income a person may have such as earnings, savings or an occupational pension.

Widow's, Widower's or Surviving Civil Partner's Non Contributory Pension is for those who do not qualify for a Widow's, Widower's or Civil Partner's Contributory Pension. This payment is a residency based means tested assistance payment. All income and earnings, including pensions, capital and property, excluding a person's own home, is assessable as means.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## Social Welfare Appeals

682. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of an appeal by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42048/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Social Welfare Ap-

peals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered in that office on 8 April 2021. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant papers and comments by or on behalf of the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought from the Department of Social Protection. Those papers were received in the Social Welfare Appeals Office on 27 April 2021.

The case is being considered by an Appeals Officer who will make a summary decision on the appeal based on the documentary evidence presented or, if required, hold an oral hearing.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

683. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of an appeal by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42049/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered in that office on 8 April 2021. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant papers and comments by or on behalf of the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought from the Department of Social Protection. Those papers were received in the Social Welfare Appeals Office on 27 April 2021.

The case is being considered by an Appeals Officer who will make a summary decision on the appeal based on the documentary evidence presented or, if necessary, hold an oral hearing.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

684. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Social Protection the details of the operation of the recovery and benefit assistance scheme in cases in which payments by an insurance company to a person take into account payments that her Department would have made to the person arising from the original injury or claim; if such recovery arrangements are in place in respect of a category of payment (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42077/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Recovery of Benefits and Assistance (RBA) Scheme recovers the value of certain illness-related social welfare payments from compensation awards made to a person as a consequence of personal injuries claims.

Where a compensator intends making a compensation payment to a person as a consequence of a non-fatal personal injury, the compensator must pay the Minister for Social Protec-

tion an amount equal to the illness-related social welfare payments that have also been paid as a consequence of that personal injury. A compensator must pay any recoverable benefits and assistance due to the Minister before making a compensation payment to the injured person.

The amount is recovered from the compensator as they are the liable entity.

The specified benefits recoverable under the RBA Scheme are:

- Illness Benefit
- Partial Capacity Benefit
- Injury Benefit
- Disablement Benefit Incapacity Supplement (that is, the increase of disablement pension payable where a person is permanently incapable of work as a result of an occupational accident or disease and does not qualify for any other social welfare payment)
- Invalidity Pension
- Disability Allowance
- Supplementary Welfare Allowance

The Pandemic Unemployment Payment is not a recoverable benefit under the Scheme.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Public Services Card**

685. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will examine the difficulties a person (details supplied) is having with obtaining a public services card; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42127/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Public Services Card (PSC) appointments were suspended from the beginning of this year due to Level 5 restrictions. However, some appointments were facilitated for urgent cases where the customer had no alternative means of accessing public services other than by acquiring a PSC.

My Department resumed PSC appointments from Monday 17th May, and an average of 1,000 appointments are now being carried out each day. It is the case that some offices of the Department are experiencing high levels of demand for appointments. Additional staff are being assigned to increase the capacity in our offices in respect of such appointments, and that capacity will be increased over the coming weeks.

My Department has contacted the person concerned and arranged an appointment for them. They have since been issued a PSC.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

*Question No. 686 answered with Question No. 650.*

### **Social Welfare Schemes**

687. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason the income from a retained firefighter (details supplied) is being used to calculate income for the back to school clothing and footwear allowance. [42169/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The back to school clothing and footwear allowance (BSCFA) scheme is a non-statutory scheme which provides a once-off payment to eligible families to assist with the costs of clothing and footwear when children start or return to school each autumn.

In order to qualify for BSCFA, an applicant must satisfy a number of qualifying conditions, one of which requires the applicant's household income to be within the income limits for that year's scheme.

Income received in the form of Working Family Payment (WFP), formerly Family Income Supplement (FIS) or Back to Work Family Dividend (BTWFD) is not assessable. However, all income received from employment, including income earned as a retained firefighter, is assessable under the normal rules of this scheme.

The application for BSCFA by the person concerned has not been awarded in this case due to household income being in excess of the appropriate income limit.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

*Question No. 688 answered with Question No. 650.*

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

689. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Social Protection if persons on the disability allowance can avail of the enterprise support grant. [42179/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Back to Work Enterprise Allowance (BTWEA) scheme offers financial support for people who are long-term unemployed and who are interested in self-employment as a route to entering the labour market. This support is available to individuals in receipt of a Disability Allowance payment who are interested in setting up their own business. The scheme plays a vital role in supporting the development of new enterprises for the long term unemployed and is payable for a 24-month period from the commencement of their new business.

The Enterprise Support Grant (ESG) is a non-statutory payment to provide financial support to a new business owner, in addition to that provided under BTWEA. Financial support is provided to a BTWEA recipient under the ESG towards the purchase of items of business supports such as mentoring, business equipment and public liability insurance.

I have also introduced an ESG grant for businesses impacted by Covid-19. This grant is available to assist eligible self-employed recipients who close their Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment to re-start their business.

I trust this clarifies the position for you.

### **Social Welfare Payments**

690. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has

been made on a review of a decision on a disability allowance application in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42215/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Following the submission of further medical evidence by the person concerned, their case has been reviewed and they have been awarded disability allowance with effect from 7 July 2021. The first payment was made on 1 September 2021.

Arrears of payment due will issue as soon as possible once any necessary adjustment is calculated and applied in respect of any overlapping payments.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Personal Public Service Numbers**

691. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Social Protection if there are issues, delays or otherwise in the application process for persons requiring PPS numbers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42255/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The SAFE registration process, which involves the authentication of a person's identity in a face-to-face interview, is the normal method of processing an application for a Personal Public Service Number (PPSN).

My Department introduced an online application service for PPSN applications in December 2020. This service was introduced to ensure that those who need a PPSN can have their application dealt with, even in the event of office closures as a result of COVID-19 public health measures.

While SAFE registrations have resumed in all offices since May, and certain offices have resumed SAFE registration appointments for PPSN applicants, the online service is still available to those who require a PPSN.

It is the case that some offices are experiencing high levels of demand for PPSNs. Additional staff are being assigned to increase the capacity in our offices in respect of PPSN applications, and that increased capacity will address the number of applications pending

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

692. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she plans to grant passes under the free travel scheme to persons who suffer from epilepsy, and who are not eligible for driving licences due to their disability, to aid their mobility; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42271/21]

693. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will investigate the provision of making free travel passes available to persons with epilepsy who are temporarily barred from driving for one year due to having a breakthrough seizure; if she will consider uncoupling the free travel pass from other qualifying payments to ensure that there is a direct application process for a free travel pass (details supplied); if she will consider this request as part of her Department's Budget 2022 proposals; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42273/21]

718. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Social Protection her position on budget proposals submitted to her by an organisation (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42719/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 692, 693 and 718 together.

The Free Travel scheme provides free travel on the main public and private transport services for those eligible under the scheme. These include road, rail and ferry services provided by companies such as Bus Átha Cliath, Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann, as well as Luas and services provided by over 80 private transport operators. There are currently approx. 1,005,000 customers with direct eligibility. The estimated expenditure on free travel in 2021 is €95 million.

In general, access to a free travel pass for those aged under 66 is linked to a person being in receipt of certain primary Social Protection payments such as Disability Allowance, Invalidity Pension, Carer's Allowance, Blind Pension and Partial Capacity Benefit.

While I am aware of the campaign by Epilepsy Ireland, extending the free travel scheme to people with epilepsy during the period in which they are disallowed from driving cannot be considered in isolation. There are a range of disabilities and medical conditions that can prevent a person from holding a driving licence and to award a free travel pass to a person with any one of these conditions in isolation would immediately result in calls for all people who are not allowed to hold a driving licence because of their medical condition to receive the free travel pass and could result in challenges under the Equal Status Act.

If the Free Travel scheme were to be extended to all people who are not allowed to drive due to their disability, regardless of whether they receive a qualifying payment, a medical assessment process would be required for all such applications, significantly changing the nature of the scheme and requiring additional administrative processes to be put in place in order to adjudicate eligibility. Significant extra funding would also be required and, accordingly, it could only be considered in the context of overall budgetary negotiations.

While consideration is always given to any requests to improve or extend eligibility to the free travel scheme, uncoupling the link between receipt of particular social welfare payments and eligibility for the free travel scheme would so fundamentally alter the scheme that it would move it away from being a social welfare measure to being a general transport initiative.

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

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputies.

*Question No. 693 answered with Question No. 692.*

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

694. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Social Protection the situation facing family carers promoted to apply for jobseeker's payment when their industry has not yet

opened given the gradual reduction in the pandemic unemployment payment rates from 7 September 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42278/21]

696. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Social Protection if, in view of the continuing regulations restraining various industries and businesses from reopening completely or even in some cases partially, it is planned to re-instate the full rates of the pandemic unemployment payment to employees or former employees in the industries affected until the full reopening of society is possible, in view of the significant difference this would make to the persons affected and the reducing number of these persons and the limited duration that will be involved; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42317/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 694 and 696 together.

The Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) was introduced as an exceptional measure in response to the unprecedented impact on employment and earnings as a result of Government mandated public health measures. To date expenditure on the scheme is over €8.6 billion.

Since the gradual lifting of restrictions and the continuing progress on Covid-19 vaccinations, the number of recipients on PUP has fallen by over 70% from a peak of 481,000 in February to just over 143,000 last week. It is important therefore in the interests of equity and sustainability to restore standard social welfare terms.

To allow as much time as possible for the economy to re-open and for employments to recover, the Government agreed to taper the payment of PUP and withdraw it slowly over a prolonged period between September 2021 and February 2022 to align it with the standard jobseekers payments.

From September the maximum rate of PUP of €350 will reduce to €300, the current rate of €300 will reduce to €250 and the rate of €250 will reduce to €203. These new payment rates will take effect in payments made on 14th September. Two further phases of rate changes are scheduled to take place from 16th November 2021 and 8th February 2022.

The Government also agreed that PUP customers currently in receipt of the €203 rate of payment would transition to standard Jobseeker terms commencing in September. The commencement of this process has been deferred until the end of September rather than from early September, as planned. This is in response to the publication, on 31st August, of the Government's Roadmap "Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting".

The Deputies may be aware that in general working age payments including jobseekers payments are not payable with other weekly social welfare payments. However, given the unprecedented circumstances of Covid-19, provision was made for PUP to be paid with certain other specified social welfare payments, including Carer's payments. PUP recipients in receipt of concurrent weekly payments will also be contacted directly during the transition period and their position will be regularised in line with standard social welfare terms.

I hope that this clarifies the position for the Deputies at this time.

### **Employment Support Services**

695. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will address a matter regarding the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement

on the matter. [42291/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** All persons in receipt of a Jobseeker's payment are required to be seeking full time work and are also required to engage with the Department's activation service. This obligation applies irrespective of whether the service is provided by the Department's own case officers or those employed by the Local Employment Service or by JobPath companies.

Customers referred to JobPath who are also working part-time will have all activities, including meetings with their personal advisor, scheduled around their work commitments and can continue to remain in their current employment. The JobPath contractors are required to be flexible in the provision of the service in this respect. Their focus will be on exploring opportunities to increase the level of employment in their client's current role, or looking at possibilities in other areas, including training, which may provide a more sustainable income and a move away from jobseeker payments.

*Question No. 696 answered with Question No. 694.*

### **Departmental Data**

697. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Social Protection the latest figures for the take-up of paternity leave; and the average cost per claim. [42329/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Paternity Benefit is payable at €245 a week, for a maximum of two weeks.

Paternity Benefit is a payment to employed and self-employed people who:

- are on paternity leave from work
- meet the relevant social insurance conditions (PRSI)

It is available for any child born or adopted after 1st September 2016

If a person is already on certain social welfare payments, they may get half-rate Paternity Benefit. They will be paid for up to two weeks. A person can start paternity leave at any time within the first 26 weeks after the birth or adoption.

Paternity Benefit is available to same-sex couples.

The number of Paternity Benefit claims received in 2021 up to 27th Aug 2021 is 18,526.

The number of Paternity Benefit claims received in 2020 was 24,884.

The number of Paternity Benefit claims received in 2019 was 28,153.

The average payment per Paternity Benefit customer in 2021 (1st Jan to 27th Aug 2021) is €264.62.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy

### **Departmental Data**

698. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Social Protection her estimate for the

cost of paternity leave over the next three years if existing duration of eligible claim continues; and the cost if the eligible period is increased by two weeks. [42330/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Paternity Benefit is a payment for employed and self-employed people who are on Paternity Leave from work who satisfy certain PRSI contribution conditions. It is paid for two weeks and is available in respect of any child born or adopted on or after 1 September 2016. Paternity Benefit is paid at €245 per week, the same rate as Maternity Benefit, Adoptive Benefit and Parent's Benefit.

A decision to extend the period of Paternity Leave for employees would have to be implemented by my colleague, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, who has policy and legal responsibility for this area. An extension of this leave would require careful consideration and consultation with relevant stakeholders.

The estimated full year cost of Paternity Benefit over the next three years for the existing duration of payment is €13.7 million per year. The estimated full year cost to extend Paternity Benefit by 2 weeks, which would double the existing duration to 4 weeks is approximately €13.7 million which would result in an annual expenditure on the scheme of approximately €27.4 million.

These estimates are based on a full year basis and on the estimated number of recipients in 2021. It should be noted that this costing is subject to change in the context of emerging trends and associated revision of the estimated number of recipients.

These estimates do not reflect any additional costs which may be incurred by employers who provide substitution or salary top-ups which, in the Civil and Public Sector, would be a matter for my colleague the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### Social Welfare Payments

699. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the payment of illness benefit can continue in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42357/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Illness benefit is paid for a maximum of 2 years or 624 claim paid days.

The person concerned commenced claiming Illness Benefit from the 5th September 2019, and his entitlement to payment of Illness Benefit is due to exhaust on the 8th September 2021. A letter issued to the person concerned on the 10th June 2021 advising him that his entitlement to the payment was due to exhaust and also providing details of other social welfare schemes he may be entitled to.

The person concerned may continue to provide medical certificates for the duration of the period in which he is unfit for work in order to receive PRSI credited contributions.

If the person concerned is permanently incapable of work or will be unfit for work for at least one year, it is open to him to apply for the long term schemes Invalidity Pension or Disability Allowance.

Should the person concerned be in need of urgent financial assistance, it is open to him to contact the Community Welfare Service at his local Intreo Centre.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

700. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her Department will accept a request for an appeal and an oral hearing in respect of the decision made in the case of a person (details supplied); if the extent of this condition now entitles them to a invalidity pension; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42363/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I am advised by the Social Welfare Appeals Office that an Appeals Officer, having fully considered all of the available evidence, decided to disallow the appeal of the person concerned by way of a summary decision on 26 January 2021.

A decision of an Appeals Officer is generally final apart from in some limited circumstances. Social Welfare legislation allows an Appeals Officer to revise his or her decision where it appears to him or her that the decision was erroneous in the light of new evidence or new facts which have been brought to his or her notice.

I am advised that the person concerned subsequently submitted additional evidence and that the Appeals Officer reviewed the appeal on foot of this additional evidence. The Appeals Officer did not find any new facts or evidence which warranted a revision of her earlier decision. The person concerned was notified of the Appeals Officer's decision on 19 August 2021.

I am advised that the Appeals Officer re-examined the file of the person concerned and all papers in the case including the additional correspondence received. The Appeals Officer was satisfied that the additional information indicated that the condition of the person concerned had deteriorated since the application for Invalidity Pension. However, the only decision before the Appeals Officer is that regarding the date of claim of 8 October 2020, the circumstances of the person at that time and the Department's decision of 14 November 2020 regarding that application.

The Appeals Officer regretted that the most recent correspondence did not provide new facts or evidence which would render her original decision erroneous and therefore a revision of her decision was not warranted.

The Appeals Officer added that it was open to the person concerned to submit a new claim directly to Invalidity Pension section of the Department of Social Protection at any time.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

701. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on a disability allowance appeal by a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42416/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The person concerned

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submitted an application for disability allowance (DA) on 13 July 2021. Their application, based upon all the evidence submitted, was refused on medical grounds as it was not found that the person concerned was substantially restricted in taking up employment.

The person concerned was notified in writing of this decision on 5 August 2021 and was also notified of their right to request a review of this decision or to appeal it to the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO).

The person in question has lodged an appeal with the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO). All the relevant papers requested by that Office are being prepared and will be submitted by the Department shortly. The SWAO will be in touch with the person in due course in relation to the progress of the appeal.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

702. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on an application for an invalidity pension by a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42417/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The person concerned has been awarded invalidity pension with effect from 15 July 2021. Payment will issue to her nominated bank account on 16 September 2021. Any arrears due from 15 July 2021 to 15 September 2021 (less any overlapping social welfare payment) will issue in due course. The person concerned was notified of this decision on 01 September 2021.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

703. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on a invalidity pension appeal in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42418/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered in that Office on 30 July 2021. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant papers and comments by or on behalf of the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought from the Department of Social Protection. These papers were received in the Social Welfare Appeals Office on 17 August 2021.

The case is being referred to an Appeals Officer, who will make a summary decision based on the documentary evidence presented or, if necessary, hold an oral hearing.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## **Direct Provision System**

704. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the breakdown of the estimated €3.9 million (details supplied) current spending related to implementing the new direct provision system; the number of budgetary cycles the spending will be take place over; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42430/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I welcome the fact that my colleague, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has brought the White Paper to end Direct Provision and to establish a new International Protection Support Service to Government, which will meet the Government commitment to end direct provision. This White Paper outlines a model for developing a new International Protection Accommodation and Support System that will be implemented between now and the end of 2024.

My Department is committed to supporting this process of change and my officials will continue to work with colleagues in Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth as we move to implement this new model.

The new model proposes a two-phase approach to accommodating applicants for international protection. In Phase 1, my Department will continue to provide Daily Expenses Allowance, as the income support payment to protection applicants while they stay in the Reception and Integration centre. The estimated cost for daily expenses allowance in the first 4 months in the Reception and Integration centre to my Department is €3.7m. These costings have been developed based on the assumption that the new model needs to have capacity to meet the needs of 3,500 applicants per year, of whom one-third will be children.

In Phase 2, applicants will move out of the Reception and Integration Centres to accommodation in the community. While it is envisaged that my Department will provide a payment channel for the new International Protection Payments on behalf of Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, it is that Department which will retain the policy and budget for the payments. The estimated cost to my Department of administering this payment channel is €0.2m per year.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

*Question No. 705 answered with Question No. 650.*

*Question No. 706 answered with Question No. 650.*

## **Social Welfare Eligibility**

707. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on an application for disability allowance by a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42443/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I confirm that an application from the person concerned for disability allowance (DA) was received by the Department on 6 July 2021.

The processing time for individual DA claims may vary in accordance with their relative complexity in terms of the three main qualifying criteria, the person's circumstances and the information they provide in support of their claim.

9 September 2021

The application has been referred to a Social Welfare Inspector (SWI) for a report on the person's means and circumstances. Once the SWI has submitted his/her report to DA section, a decision will be made on the application and the person concerned will be notified directly of the outcome.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### Social Welfare Appeals

708. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on a pandemic unemployment payment scheme appeal by a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42444/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered in that office on 1 September 2021. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant Departmental papers and comments by the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought. When these papers have been received from the Department, the appeal will be referred to an Appeals Officer who will make a summary decision on the appeal based on the documentary evidence presented or, if necessary, hold an oral hearing.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### Community Employment Schemes

709. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will consider the extension of the duration of community employment schemes where appropriate for workers who feel that they were unable to benefit fully from the training and opportunities to gain experience normally afforded by a scheme due to restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will investigate whether the terms for one such group of workers in a facility (details supplied) can be extended. [42448/21]

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

My Department has supported CE schemes since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. CE participants, whose contracts were due to end during the periods of restrictions, have had their contracts extended for the duration of those restrictions.

In June this year, I announced that the existing CE participants' contract extension date would be further extended until 29/10/2021 and that the conclusion of these places would be undertaken on a coordinated and phased basis. Over 11,000 CE and Tús participants are benefiting from this latest contract extension up to the end of October next. This approach will give participants time to complete training and work experience, while also supporting the delivery of important community services.

While the extension of placements helps to alleviate immediate pressures, it is important to note that CE placements are intended to be temporary and subject to time limits. This is to ensure the continued availability of places on CE schemes for other candidates. The current extensions will therefore be reviewed as the economy re-opens and we would hope that we can return to a normal level of throughput in order that places will be available to new candidates including those displaced from employment due to COVID-19.

I will continue to support and improve the programme for the benefit of the CE participants and the valuable contribution being made to local communities through the provision of services while ensuring places are available for the those who are long term unemployed.

The Deputy may be interested to know that the CE scheme to which he referred currently has 2 vacancies and candidates will be in place to fill these vacancies shortly.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### **Community Employment Schemes**

710. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will investigate the issues facing rural community employment schemes (details supplied) in terms of the difficulties in the recruitment of community employment workers by these rural community groups; if community employment scheme participant eligibility will be reviewed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42472/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** The Community Employment (CE) Scheme is an active labour market programme designed to provide eligible long-term unemployed people and other disadvantaged persons with an opportunity to engage in useful work within their communities on a temporary, fixed term basis. Those who are unemployed and in receipt of an eligible payment for 12 months or more, are regarded as long-term unemployed. This includes time spent on the pandemic unemployment payment (PUP).

I am very aware of the challenges caused by the Covid-19 public health restrictions and the adverse impact on a number of rural and urban CE schemes in recruiting new CE participants. My Department supported CE schemes since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, by ensuring that contingency measures were in place to support CE schemes.

This included the extension of CE participant contracts that were due to end during the periods of restrictions. The measures introduced helped to mitigate recruitment challenges for CE schemes while supporting the ongoing delivery of important community services throughout the period. I and my Department are very aware of the need to continue to support CE schemes during the current recovery period.

One of the measures included in the Pathways to Work Strategy announced by Government in July, 2021 was an increase in the capacity of the Public Employment Service in Intreo Offices and contracted services to further support jobseekers through the provision of job search advice and assistance. This increased capacity will support persons who jobs are permanently lost due to COVID as well as those unemployed pre-pandemic. These additional resources will be central to meeting the increased demand for services, given the impact of the pandemic on employment and will support the increased demand for new candidate referrals to fill existing and new CE vacancies. In this regard, I would encourage CE projects to remain in close contact with the Department's Community Development Officers.

Under Pathways to Work, the Government announced 3,000 additional places on Employment Support Schemes, including Community Employment. Of the additional places, 1,475 places have recently been assigned to existing CE schemes. These new places will be available to existing and more recent long term unemployed persons, including those whose employment was adversely affected as a result of Covid-19.

I am fully committed to the future of CE and will continue to support and improve the programme for the benefit of both the CE participants and the valuable contribution being made to local communities throughout the country, while ensuring that these placements are available for the current cohort of long term unemployed.

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

711. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will clarify if sick benefit entitlements will be adversely affected for persons who were in receipt of PUP payments over the past 18 months; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42577/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Entitlement to illness benefit or other PRSI dependent payments will not be adversely affected for persons entitled to and in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment (PUP). PRSI contributions are attributed to persons on PUP at the same value as they were paying while employed immediately before commencing PUP.

I hope that this clarifies the position at this time.

*Question No. 712 answered with Question No. 650.*

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

713. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if an application for a supplementary welfare allowance will be reviewed in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42613/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The person concerned made an application for an Exceptional Needs Payment (ENP) on 10/08/2021. This claim was disallowed as it was determined, based on the application and supporting documentation provided, that the need was not exceptional and it was considered reasonable that the person concerned had sufficient means to cover the costs of the items from their household income.

The Designated Person issued a letter dated 25/08/2021 to the person concerned advising her of the outcome of her application and affording her the option of seeking a review of the decision.

A Reviewing Officer has now reviewed the person's application. The Reviewing Officer found that the Designated Person complied with the legislation and guidelines in disallowing the application on the basis the person concerned has household income of over €800 per week and an amount of almost €4,000 in her bank account. The decision to disallow the application was therefore upheld by the Reviewing Officer and the person concerned was informed of the outcome in writing on 07/09/2021.

If the circumstances of the person concerned have changed since her last ENP application it is open to her to submit a new application by contacting her local Community Welfare Ser-

vice by phone at (01) 6016360 or by email at [KildareCWS@welfare.ie](mailto:KildareCWS@welfare.ie).

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

714. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a student (details supplied) is eligible for jobseeker's allowance given that the course is designed to allow for flexible and blended learning to explicitly allow students to study and work simultaneously; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42627/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Jobseekers Allowance is a means tested income support payment for people who are unable to obtain full time employment and satisfy the scheme's statutory conditions. The revised estimated expenditure for the Jobseekers Allowance scheme in 2021 is approximately €1.64 billion.

Social welfare legislation provides that students who are attending a full-time course of study are not eligible for the Jobseeker's Allowance. A person must satisfy, amongst other things, the conditions of being available for and genuinely seeking full-time work in order to be eligible for a Jobseekers payment.

In general, the level of commitment required to participate in a full-time course of education is not consistent with the jobseeker's schemes requirement to be available for full-time employment and genuinely seeking such work. However, decisions are made based on the circumstances of each case.

I trust that this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Payments**

715. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a carer's allowance will be made payable in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42671/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Carer's allowance (CA) is a means-tested social assistance payment, made to persons who are providing full-time care and attention to a person who has such a disability that they require that level of care.

I am advised that there is no current application registered for the person concerned for CA. If the person in question wishes to make an application, she should complete and return an application form (CR1) to CA section in the social welfare services office, Longford, as soon as possible.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Payments**

716. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the way an alleged overpayment of maternity benefit has occurred in the case of a case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42690/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The person concerned applied for and received the full standard 26 weeks of Maternity Benefit in 2020, amounting to €6370.

However, she returned to employment during her Maternity leave period, and as a result she was not qualified for receipt of Maternity Benefit for that period.

An overpayment of €1,225 (5 weeks at €245) was assessed. That decision was unsuccessfully appealed to the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office and their decision was communicated to the appellant by letter dated the 12th November 2020.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

717. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Social Protection the steps being taken to facilitate remote working within her Department in particular to encourage remote working for those who live in the regions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42714/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Civil Service departments and offices have been working in line with Government Covid-19 guidance, which provided for home working to continue where possible. As an essential service, staff in my Department have continued, throughout the pandemic, to work both on site in office premises and remotely to deliver for our customers across our nationwide network of offices. The number of staff who are working remotely at any one time across all regions is approximately 3,300 or 50% of the total staffing number and has remained relatively constant through the Covid-19 restrictions.

The Government has now published Ireland's plan for the next phase of the response to the pandemic - COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting. Under this plan, the advice to work from home unless absolutely essential to attend the workplace is being withdrawn. This means that people can return to the workplace on a phased basis from 20th of September.

The Government has also confirmed its support of blended working in the Civil Service and, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is developing an overarching central framework to support consistency of implementation of blended working across the Civil Service. Key considerations of the development of this policy is the potential improvements in work life balance and regional development across the State.

This framework will inform the development of organization-level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department / Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas. In conjunction with this framework an application process is also currently being developed to allow staff to apply for blended working into the future.

In line with this approach, it is intended, subject to business needs and individual suitability, to make blended working part of the way that my Department will work on a more permanent basis. To this end, my Department will develop a blended working policy based on the framework being developed by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and will aim to implement this policy in early 2022.

*Question No. 718 answered with Question No. 692.*

## **Flexible Work Practices**

719. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Social Protection the way in which her Department and public bodies and agencies under her remit are accommodating requests for persons to work from home. [42764/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Civil Service departments and offices have been working in line with Government Covid-19 guidance, which provided for home working to continue where possible. As an essential service, staff in my Department have continued, throughout the pandemic, to work both on site in office premises and remotely to deliver for our customers across our nationwide network of offices. The number of staff who are working remotely at any one time across all regions is approximately 3,300 or 50% of the total staffing number and has remained relatively constant through the Covid-19 restrictions.

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In line with this approach, it is intended, subject to business needs and individual suitability, to make blended working part of the way that my Department will work on a more permanent basis. To this end, my Department will develop a blended working policy based on the framework being developed by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and will aim to implement this policy in early 2022.

The position in relation to the relevant bodies under the aegis of my Department is as follows:

### 1. Citizens Information Board (CIB)

All CIB staff members are currently working remotely. CIB has committed to developing a remote working policy in line with central arrangements.

As CIB does not have a long-term remote working policy at present, no applications for permanent remote working have been received.

### 2. Pensions Authority:

All Pensions Authority employees continue to work from home pending further guidance from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform regarding a return to the office.

Where required, employees return to the office to undertake essential IT, administration and facilities management work. The Pensions Authority is currently developing its longer-term remote working policy and procedures in line with DPER guidance as it becomes available. No

employees have applied to work from home permanently or from a hybrid model yet.

### **Social Welfare Code**

720. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will outline the rationale for the averaging rule as it applies to State pension calculations; if she accepts that this rule has the effect of reducing the total pension award of persons who take on temporary part-time work at an early age; if there are any plans to review this rule, process; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42812/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** When the contributory pension was introduced in 1961 many workers had not been given the opportunity to build up social insurance contributions for all their working life. As such, the yearly average, and banded payments, were used to calculate the rate of payment - otherwise people would have had to wait and contribute for a considerable number of years to achieve a reasonable pension payment in retirement. The yearly average mechanism is set out in detail as part of the Operational Guidelines for State Pension Contributory published on the Department's web site at <http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/4f38a6-operational-guidelines-state-pension-contributory/>.

A policy to introduce the Total Contributions Approach (TCA) to pensions calculation was adopted by Government in the National Pensions Framework in 2010. In January 2018 the Government agreed to a proposal that allowed pensioners affected by the September 2012 changes in rate bands to have their pension entitlement calculated by an interim "Total Contributions Approach" (TCA) which would include up to 20 years of a new HomeCaring credit. This approach significantly benefited many people, particularly women, whose work history included an extended period of time outside the paid workplace, while raising families or in a caring role. The interim TCA ensured that the totality of a person's social insurance contributions - as opposed to the timing of them - would determine their final pension outcome.

Those who reached state pension age after September 2012 had their pension entitlement reviewed under the interim TCA method with 56% of women reviewed receiving an increase while 24% of men reviewed also received an increase. Those who have reached state pension age since January 2018 have had their pension entitlement assessed under yearly averaging and the interim TCA with the most beneficial payment being awarded to them.

As part of the Programme for Government, a Commission on Pensions was set up to look at sustainability and eligibility issues with the State Pension and the Social Insurance Fund. More broadly, it has also been considering the issue of retirement ages in employment contracts and how the pension system can further accommodate carers, who are predominantly women. The Commission will set out options for the Government to address issues such as qualifying age, contribution rates, total contributions and eligibility requirements. The Commission formally submitted its report to me earlier this week.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Community Employment Schemes**

721. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a request to retain a person (details supplied) will be facilitated with particular reference to the fact that both employee and employer wish to maintain the status quo; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42825/21]

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

My Department has supported CE schemes since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. CE participants, whose contracts were due to end during the periods of restrictions, have had their contracts extended for the duration of those restrictions.

In June this year, I announced that the existing CE participants' contract extension date would be further extended until 29/10/2021 and that the conclusion of these places would be undertaken on a coordinated and phased basis. Over 11,000 CE and Tús participants are benefiting from this latest contract extension up to the end of October next. This approach will give participants time to complete training and work experience, while also supporting the delivery of important community services.

While the extension of placements helps to alleviate immediate pressures, it is important to note that CE placements are intended to be temporary and subject to time limits. This is to ensure the continued availability of places on CE schemes for other candidates. The current extensions will therefore be reviewed as the economy re-opens and it is hoped that we can return to a normal level of throughput in order that places will be available to new candidates including those displaced from employment due to COVID-19.

The person concerned commenced on the CE scheme on 15/10/2018 and will have completed his 3 years allowable on CE on 08/10/2021. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic the person concerned received an extension to 29/10/2021.

During his time on CE, the person concerned has received relevant work experience in the area of maintenance, caretaking and grounds work. He has completed certification in industry related courses such as Workplace Safety, Fire Safety, Manual Handling, Safe Pass, Abrasive Wheels and Handheld Pesticide Applications. In advance of leaving the project, the CE Supervisor will help him prepare an exit plan to assist his return to the labour market.

On finishing CE, the person concerned may be referred to my Department's JobPath service who can work with him to ensure that the benefits of the experience and training received during his time on CE are maximised. The person concerned may receive one-to-one intensive and regular engagement with a personal adviser who can assess his skills, experience, challenges and work goals and assist him in finding full-time sustainable employment. This process can also help identify potential employment opportunities and can offer support to overcoming any barriers to employment. A person may re-qualify for CE after a period of one year in receipt of a qualifying social welfare payment, subject to not having exceeded the lifetime maximum period on CE.

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

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

I trust this clarifies the matter.

## Community Employment Schemes

722. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a request to retain a person (details supplied) will be facilitated with particular reference to the fact that both employee and employer wish to maintain the status quo; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42826/21]

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

The person concerned commenced on the CE scheme on 30/04/2018 and completed his 3 years allowable on CE on 23/04/2021. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic the person concerned received an extension to 02/07/2021 which has now been further extended to at least 29/10/2021.

CE participants aged 62 years and over who meet the eligibility requirements may apply for further participation under the Service Support Stream (SSS). Participation is subject to the availability of SSS places, satisfactory performance on the CE scheme, recommendation by the Scheme Sponsor and annual approval by my Department. It is open to the person concerned to apply for a place under the SSS option with effect from 01/11/2021 and if successful he may remain on the scheme until he reaches State pension age on 08/03/2022.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

## Public Procurement Contracts

723. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Social Protection the tendering processes that were followed in respect of the allocation of contracts under the JobPath programme in 2021; the number of applications received under each tender; the process by which they were evaluated; the areas tenders allocated in 2021 cover; the length of each successful new contract; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42866/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The tenders for the JobPath service were published in December 2013 and Jobpath contracts were awarded in July 2015. Both contracts for the JobPath service were subsequently extended to maintain the service for 2020 and, subsequently, 2021. There was no tendering process, applications, evaluation, allocation or new contracts associated with the JobPath service in 2021.

For the Deputies information there has been a more recent procurement process for a Regional Employment Service in four lots covering seven counties in the Midlands and North-West. My Department sought tenders for four lots covering Donegal, Sligo and Leitrim, Longford and Westmeath and Laois and Offaly. This procurement process is still ongoing.

Phase two of the procurement of the Regional Employment Service will commence shortly following further engagement with service partners and the incorporation of learnings from phase one.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## Public Services Card

724. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her attention has been drawn to long waiting periods experienced by persons needing to obtain a public services card; and the steps her Department is taking to ensure the card can be obtained as soon as possible for the purpose of accessing important public services. [42887/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The SAFE registration process, which my Department uses to authenticate a person's identity, is a face to face process which results in the issuing of a Public Services Card (PSC). It is not possible for someone who does not already have a PSC to acquire one without attending an in-person appointment.

Any person who requires a PSC should contact their local DSP office.

My Department carries out an average of 1,000 PSC appointments each day, across its nationwide office network.

It is the case that some offices of the Department are experiencing high levels of demand for appointments. Additional staff are being assigned to increase the capacity in our offices in respect of such appointments, and that capacity will be increased over the coming weeks and will address the number of applications pending.

In respect of those customers who already have a PSC but wish to renew their card, they have the option of contacting their local office for an appointment or they can use the new on-line PSC renewal service which is available on *MyWelfare.ie*.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### Social Welfare Inspections

725. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will consider an independent review into the activities of social welfare inspectors at ports and airports with a view to establishing the number of persons' claims for social welfare payments that were suspended on foot of airport checks; the manner in which flights were selected for such checks; the way this activity was in keeping with complainants' rights to fair procedures; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42911/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As part of my Department's obligations to ensure proper delivery of its service and compliance with the various scheme conditions, including that Exchequer resources provided for those schemes are protected, Social Welfare Inspectors are required to carry out a range of inspections. These include desk-based assessments of customer claims, face-to-face interviews with customers, home visits, and audits of employers' PRSI records.

The appointment and duties of Social Welfare Inspectors are provided for in the Social Welfare (Consolidation) Act 2005. Under the provisions of this Act, social welfare inspectors have powers to attend at ports and airports and make enquiries for the purposes of the control and compliance of social welfare schemes. Inspectors have been undertaking control checks at airports and ports since 2012.

Social Welfare Inspectors operate under a code of practice which sets out the manner in which they are required to deal with customers. My Department also has a Customer Charter in place which sets out what a customer should expect when they contact, or are contacted by, the Department. Where a review of a claim results in a disallowance, the customer is entitled to the reasons for the decision and has a right of appeal or review.

My Department has no plans to enact a review for social welfare inspections at ports and airports, and which are provided for by statute, given the existing code of practice and Customer Charter already in place to deal with any issues which may arise.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Inspections**

726. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Social Protection the nature of any data collected by her Department relating to social welfare inspectors making home visits; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42915/21]

727. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of home visits carried out by social welfare inspectors in 2020 by county; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42916/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 726 and 727 together.

As part of my Department's obligations to ensure proper delivery of its service and compliance with the various scheme conditions, Social Welfare Inspectors are required to carry out a range of inspections. The appointment and duties of Social Welfare Inspectors are provided for in Section 250 of the Social Welfare (Consolidation) Act 2005. These outline the requirement for a claimant to give an inspector information and any documents that s/he may require for the purposes of an investigation.

The social welfare inspector considers what investigative approach is required and is most appropriate to the case including desk-based assessments of customer claims, face-to-face interviews with customers, home visits, and audits of employers' PRSI records.

The nature of the data collected is contingent on the scheme for which an application is being made. If, for example, eligibility for the scheme involves a means assessment, then information and data necessary to assess means will be sought. This might include details of earnings and/or income from employment or self-employment, or details of assets such as capital or property.

My Department has a Customer Charter in place which sets out what a customer should expect when they contact, or are contacted by, the Department. Inspectors operate under a code of practice which sets out the manner in which they are required to deal with customers. The code requires that customers must at all times be treated equally, fairly, with respect and dignity, as outlined in the Customer Charter.

As regards the information sought by the Deputy on the number of home visits carried out by social welfare inspectors in 2020 by county, it is not possible to provide this as this information is not collated by the Department. Where appropriate, details of home visits by Social Welfare Inspectors may be included in individual case reports. Statistical information is not available from this source.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

*Question No. 727 answered with Question No. 726.*

728. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her ministerial phones have been hacked or attempted to be hacked during her term of office. [42932/21]

729. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she has ever used her personal phones for Government business; and if so, if the personal phones have been hacked during her term of office. [42950/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 728 and 729 together.

I am not aware of any attempt to hack my phone.

*Question No. 729 answered with Question No. 728.*

### Freedom of Information

730. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of freedom of information requests responded to by her Department in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; the number of responses that included documents related to text messages and other phone message communications such as messages sent through an application (details supplied) in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42972/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The number of Freedom of Information requests received by my Department since 2016 is set out in the table below:

Year	Number of FOI Requests
2016	2,089
2017	2,443
2018	2,510
2019	2,614
2020	1,706
2021 to date	1,099
TOTAL	12,461

17 requests received over the period in question did specify the application referred to and/or text messages in the wording of the request.

### Commissions of Investigation

731. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the cost of each commission of investigation under the remit of her Department over the preceding decade. [42998/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** No commissions of investigation under the aegis of my Department were established in the period of time outlined by the Deputy.

### Departmental Reports

732. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Social Protection when she expects

the Pensions Commission will finalise its report and submit it; if a timeline is in place for same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43010/21]

**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 was a major and complex body of work. The Commission had 18 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](http://pensionscommission.gov.ie).

The Pensions Commission formally submitted its report to me earlier this week. I will now consider the report and then take it to Government. The Government will need time to work through the Commission's recommendations and make decisions. It has committed to taking action within six months of receipt of the Commission's report.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### Ministerial Appointments

733. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of formal and informal roles held by a person (details supplied) in the name of her Department or associated agency in the lifetime of this Government; when the person was appointed to same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43043/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** No formal or informal roles were held by the person referred to in either the Department of Social Protection or the bodies under its aegis during the lifetime of this Government.

### Social Welfare Schemes

734. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on an application for a widower's pension in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43048/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** A person claiming widow's, widower's or surviving civil partner's contributory pension must provide evidence that they are the legal widow, widower or surviving civil partner. The original civil marriage certificate which has already been provided by the person concerned does not provide the civil status of either of the parties to the marriage.

The person concerned has been requested to furnish the marriage licence, which provides this necessary information, so that his claim can be given further consideration. Once the marriage license is received, his claim to widower's contributory pension will be examined and he will be notified of outcome without delay.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Data Protection**

735. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she and-or her special advisers and-or officials use or have used services (details supplied) to communicate in the past 18 months. [43079/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The services mentioned by the Deputy are not part of the portfolio of applications issued on Department of Social Protection computers or mobile devices and are not used to transact departmental business.

### **International Protection**

736. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his Department is involved in the resettlement plans for Afghani citizens following the takeover of the government of Afghanistan by the Taliban; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42178/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I can confirm to the Deputy that in response to the crisis in Afghanistan, approximately 330 places have been made available for humanitarian cases from Afghanistan through the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

Priority has been given to those working on human rights issues, including the rights of women, girls, and minorities, as well as those working with NGOs and European and international organisations.

The matter will be kept under review.

### **International Protection**

737. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will increase resettlement places for Afghan refugees and provide additional support and assistance for the Irish Refugee Protection Programme and participate in the wider EU redistribution. [42794/21]

738. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will commit to resettle a minimum of 1,000 Afghan refugees. [42795/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 737 and 738 together.

I wish to confirm to the Deputy that the Government responded to the crisis in Afghanistan by announcing the provision of approximately 300 places under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) for those most at risk in Afghanistan, including those working on human rights issues and on the rights of women and girls and minorities specifically, as well as those working with NGOs and international organisations and media.

This decision will be kept under review as the situation evolves.

There are capacity and resourcing issues for the Irish Refugee Protection Programme which my Department will also keep under review.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

739. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when the legislation to provide for a right to flexible working will be published; when he plans to have it passed into law; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42862/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Article 9 of Directive 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers provides that Member States shall take the necessary measures to ensure that workers with children up to a specified age, which shall be at least eight years, and carers, have the right to request flexible working arrangements for caring purposes. The date for transposition of the Directive is 2 August 2022.

While many of the provisions of the Directive are already in place or have been implemented, there remain a small number yet to be translated into Irish law and procedures. I intend to bring to Government in the coming months legislative proposals fully to implement the Directive including with regard to a right to request flexible working.

The Tánaiste is separately developing proposals on a right to request remote working.

### **Departmental Data**

740. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of applications received from communities under the community sponsorship Ireland scheme for refugees each year since it was incepted; the number of these applications that have been completed; the number of families accommodated each year under this scheme; the total number of refugees involved; the locations that have been successful with their applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43083/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I wish to confirm to the Deputy the following information in relation to community sponsorship:

the number of applications received from communities under the community sponsorship Ireland scheme for refugees each year since it was incepted:

2018 - 2

2019 - 16

2020 - 7

2021 - 4

Total - 29

All applications received by the Irish Refugee Protection Programme of my Department to date have been completed, reviewed and approved.

Q: the number of families accommodated each year under this scheme;

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A: One family per group – currently 13 families (55 individuals).

2018 - 1

2019 - 7

2020 - 1

2021 - 4

There are a further 4 families scheduled to arrive and be accommodated with groups next week.

To date the total number of refugees involved is 55 individuals in 13 families. From next week there will be an additional 4 families and 14 individuals).

Locations that have been successful with their applications:

Kinsale

Dunshaughlin

Carraigaline

Middleton x 2

Dublin 6

Kells, Co Meath

Killester, Dublin 5

Dublin 8

Tallow, Waterford

Clane

Lismore, Waterford

Carrigtwohill

Families are being settled next week in the following locations:

Ovens, Co Cork

Navan, Co Meath

Naas, Co Kildare

Dublin 5

Further applications at differing stages of the process are recorded from the following locations:

North County Dublin

Cork City

Cahirciveen

Cape Clear

Enniskerry

Roundwood

Meath

Raheny, Dublin 5

Baltinglass

Wexford

Dun Laoghaire

Dalkey

Co Westmeath

Tipperary

Co Clare

Co Mayo.

### Children in Care

741. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of children living in State care currently. [41499/21]

743. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of children who are currently in the care of the State but not in fostering. [41501/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 741 and 743 together.

The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

### Children in Care

742. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of children who have come through State care in each of the past ten years. [41500/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

*Question No. 743 answered with Question No. 741.*

## **Children in Care**

744. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the longest length of time any child had to wait after being taken into the care of the State before being placed into foster care since 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41502/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

## **Departmental Policies**

745. **Deputy Fergus O’Dowd** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the current policy regarding the employment of persons with disabilities in his Department and in each State and semi-State body under the aegis of his Department; the disability quota of his Department at present; if there is an active campaign to increase the disability workforce from the current target of 3% to a minimum of 6% by 2024; if this quota has now been exceeded; if so, the details of same; if there has been an advertised competition in relation to the quota; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41588/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005 sets out the legal obligations of public service bodies to meet a target of 3% of employees with disabilities. Under the Act, the National Disability Authority (NDA) has the statutory role to report, on an annual basis, on compliance with the 3% target.

The Disability Act 2005 defines disability as follows:

“Disability, in relation to a person, means a substantial restriction in the capacity of the person to carry on a profession, business or occupation in the State or to participate in social or cultural life in the State by reason of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual impairment.”

Under the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015 - 2024 the Government has committed to increasing the public service employment target for persons with disabilities on an incremental basis from a minimum of 3% to a minimum of 6% by 2024.

In order to report on this target my Department asks every employee, whether or not they have any disability, to complete a census form and return it, in confidence and on a voluntary basis, to the nominated person in the HR Unit. Based on these returns, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth reported a total of 5.33% of staff in the Department who had declared a disability as at the 31st December 2020.

While this Department uses the Public Service Appointments to recruit new staff, the Department also participates in the Willing, Able and Mentoring (WAM) Programme which offers 6 month placements at EO level to graduates with disabilities. While the Association of Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) runs this programme, it works with PAS in identifying suitable candidates for this programme.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth acts as the monitoring committee for the collection of this data from the National Disability Authority, the

Adoption Authority of Ireland, the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) and Oberstown Children Detention Campus (Oberstown). With the exception of Oberstown, these agencies all exceeded the 3% target. Oberstown was just under the target, having focussed its recruitment throughout 2020 on a particular area of frontline staff - Residential Social Care Workers. However, while Oberstown did not meet the statutory minimum for 2020, it did provide 4 work experience placements for people with disabilities through out the year which were not counted as part of their overall percentage return at end of 2020.

As independent bodies, the Ombudsman for Children's Office and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission report directly to the Department of Expenditure and Reform with their statistical returns on employees with a disability.

### **Rights of People with Disabilities**

746. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the timeline in relation to commitments under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as to the implementation of the several pieces of legislation relating to persons with disabilities which have not yet been implemented in full; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41617/21]

750. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his attention has been drawn to the fact that there are several pieces of legislation which have not been fully implemented in relation to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (details supplied); if he will share his proposal to ensure that the Government honours its commitments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41819/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 746 and 750 together.

Ireland ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2018. This marked an important milestone in a process to strengthen the rights of people with disabilities in Ireland that has gathered momentum since Ireland became a signatory to the Convention in 2007.

Our approach to meeting the obligations of the UNCRPD is one of progressive realisation, each year moving forward on key reforms, with the obligations arising from the Convention being met over time. Initial priority has been given to meeting legislative commitments.

One of the key pieces of legislation to be progressed is the commencement of the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 which is the responsibility of my Department and a commitment under the Programme for Government.

This is a very important piece of legislation that changes the existing law on capacity from the status approach of the wardship system to a flexible functional approach, whereby capacity is assessed on an issue and time-specific basis. It will abolish the wards of court system for adults by repealing the Lunacy Regulation (Ireland) Act 1871. We are working towards a date of June 2022 for full commencement.

Amendments are required to the 2015 Act before full commencement can take place. Work is actively taking place on an Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Bill, which is expected to be published by year-end and enacted early next year. The amendments will streamline processes, in the interests of those using its provisions. They will also strengthen the

safeguards included in the 2015 Act.

The Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Bill is also being used to advance a number of other legislative provisions required by the UNCRPD. These provisions were previously contained in the Disability (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill which lapsed with the dissolution of the last Dáil, and include measures such as the role to be played by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and the National Disability Authority in monitoring the implementation of the UNCRPD.

### **Children in Care**

747. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he plans to review the rates paid to foster parents; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41623/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** There are no plans at present to change the rate of the foster care allowance. However, my Department is undertaking an extensive review of the Child Care Act 1991 and will examine foster care arrangements as part of this review. It will have regard to income support measures available to foster families generally.

I acknowledge foster carers as the backbone of child care services. Foster care is the preferred option in Ireland for children who cannot live with their parents or guardians. Approximately 92% of children in care are looked after by foster carers. More than one quarter of these children are placed with relative foster carers.

The foster care allowance is currently €325 per week per child under 12 years of age and €352 per week per child aged 12 years and over. This payment was protected during recent economic hardships and is tax-free. It is paid in respect of the child and provided in order to allow foster carers to meet all of the child’s daily living needs, including food, clothing, basic travel, education costs and hobbies and sports activities. The allowance is not considered as means for social welfare purposes.

Foster carers also receive a number of targeted supports to ensure they continue to function as a recognised and valued part of the alternative care system. Key elements of this support include a link social worker, access to training and support group meetings and the allocation of a social worker for each child in care. It is important that foster carers have access to specialist services to meet the child’s identified needs. Respite care for children may be arranged if it is part of their care plan.

Pre-assessment and ongoing training are compulsory for foster carers in order to equip them with the skills and knowledge to provide high quality care. Recognising the specific dynamics and the personal nature of relative care, Tusla addresses the training needs of relatives who are foster carers separately. In addition, Tusla provides funding for the Irish Foster Care Association which offers a range of supports to carers, including advocacy, mediation, training and a telephone advice service.

### **Health Services Staff**

748. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth further to Parliamentary Question No. 42 of 8 September 2020, the status of

the 13 trainee psychologists who were being funded in September 2020; and if any additional psychologists have been funded for training and or employed since that date. [41804/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

### **Child and Family Agency**

749. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the amount of the total budget for Tusla in 2021 that was set aside for counselling services. [41805/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, provides funding to counselling services through a network of community-based counselling service providers and Family Resource Centres that offer a range of counselling/psychotherapy and supports. This funding is provided where there is a genuine need and demand for services and where they can be provided at low cost to adults, couples, children, young people and families.

While this Department provides the overall budget for Tusla, the amount that Tusla has budgeted specifically for counselling services in 2021 is a part of Tusla’s own budgetary process. Therefore, I have asked Tusla to respond directly to the Deputy as this is an operational matter for Tusla.

*Question No. 750 answered with Question No. 746.*

### **Legislative Process**

751. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the reason the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 has not yet been fully enacted over five and a half years later; the definitive timeline for its enactment given the human rights implications of the anachronistic Lunacy Regulation Act 1871 which is still being used; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41820/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 (the 2015 Act) is a very important piece of legislation that changes the existing law on capacity from the status approach of the wardship system to a flexible functional approach, whereby capacity is assessed on an issue and time-specific basis. It will abolish the wards of court system for adults by repealing the Lunacy Regulation (Ireland) Act 1871. Adults currently in wardship will transition to the new decision-making support arrangements on a phased basis over 3 years from the date of commencement.

The Government made a commitment in the Programme for Government to commencing the 2015 Act, recognising the importance of the much needed reform it represents. We are working towards a date of June 2022 for full commencement.

The delays in commencement of the 2015 Act arise from two principal factors. The organisation that will operate the progressive provisions of the 2015 Act, the Decision Support Service, has to become operational and to be able to respond to the complex decision-making

needs of people with capacity difficulties. Amendments are also required to the 2015 Act before full commencement can take place.

Work is actively taking place on an Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Bill, which is expected to be published before year-end and enacted early next year. The amendments will streamline processes, in the interests of those using its provisions. They will also strengthen the safeguards included in the 2015 Act.

Some provisions of the Act have been commenced to enable; the recruitment of the Director of the Decision Support Service; the establishment of a multidisciplinary working group in relation to Advance Healthcare Directives; and most recently, on the 1st of February this year, the repeal of the Marriage of Lunatics Act, which means that a ward can now marry if she or he has capacity to do so.

The Decision Support Service has made considerable progress in putting in place the administrative and IT systems needed to operate the 2015 Act. To this end a budget of €5.8 million was secured for the Decision Support Service for 2021, a significant increase on its €3.5 million 2020 budget.

A high-level Steering Group, chaired by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, meets monthly to oversee and drive progress towards full commencement. The Steering Group comprises senior officials from the Department of Health, the Department of Justice, the Mental Health Commission, the Courts Service, the HSE, and the Decision Support Service, recognising that successful operation of the 2015 Act will involve multiple stakeholders. They are working towards commencement of the 2015 Act in June 2022, with the Decision Support Service opening for business immediately thereafter.

### **Rights of People with Disabilities**

752. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his attention has been drawn to the slow pace of progress in achieving disability rights in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41914/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** Ireland currently has two whole-of-government strategies in place, the National Disability Inclusion Strategy (now extended until the end of 2022) and the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities, 2015-2024.

These are the key frameworks for policy and action to address the needs of persons with disabilities in Ireland and to improve their lives in a practical sense. My Department coordinates these two strategies and my colleague, Minister of State Anne Rabbitte, chairs the NDIS Steering Group.

In addition, Ireland is also party to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), having ratified it in 2018. This marked an important milestone in a process to strengthen the rights of people with disabilities in Ireland that has gathered momentum since Ireland became a signatory to the Convention in 2007. The current model for meeting the obligations of the UNCRPD is through delivery of the two national strategies.

My Department is working on the development of a UNCRPD Implementation Plan, which is a Programme for Government commitment. A concept paper setting out a pathway to designing the Implementation Plan and the core principles that will underline the Implementation Plan was presented to the NDIS Steering Group in June this year. The concept paper will be

discussed further at the upcoming NDIS Steering Group meeting with a view to submitting a final Implementation Plan to Government early next year.

### **Parental Leave**

753. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he has considered engaging with employers to encourage them to top up rates of parent's benefit to encourage parents to avail of this leave; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41933/21]

754. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he has considered engaging with employers to encourage them to top-up levels of parent's benefit to encourage parents to take up the newly extended parent's leave without financial penalty; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41935/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 753 and 754 together.

Under the Parent's Leave and Benefit Act 2019, and subsequent amendments made under the Family Leave and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2021, working parents are entitled to five weeks of paid parent's leave for each relevant parent, as defined in the legislation, to be taken in the first two years after the birth or adoptive placement of a child. The definition of relevant parent under the Act includes a parent of the child and the spouse, civil partner or cohabitant of a parent of the child.

The intention of parent's leave is to enable parents to spend time with their child in the earliest years and is deliberately non-transferrable between parents to ensure that both parents are encouraged and supported in taking time out from work to spend time with their child. This is further supported through the provision of Parent's Benefit, which is paid at an equivalent rate to maternity, paternity and adoptive benefits at €245 per week. It is open to employers to top up payments. There is no barrier preventing them from doing so.

It is important that the provision of family leaves meet the needs of working parents and families and my Department is monitoring the uptake of family leaves and will examine the need for further actions, as required.

*Question No. 754 answered with Question No. 753.*

### **Flexible Work Practices**

755. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the measures he is taking to promote or facilitate remote working for staff in his Department or bodies under the aegis of his Department; the costs this has generated in terms of the provision of laptops, desktop computers or contributions to wi-fi costs or phone-related expenses; the number of staff who have applied for permission to work from home on a permanent or hybrid-model basis (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41947/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** Departments and Offices are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with em-

ployee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

### **Immigration Policy**

756. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his Department has been working to update The Migrant Integration Strategy-A Blueprint for the Future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42176/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Since 2017, the ‘Migrant Integration Strategy (MIS) – A Blueprint for the Future’ has been the central policy framework adopted by Government to promote the integration of all migrants who are legally residing in the State. It envisages a whole-of-government approach to enhance diversity, inclusion and equity for migrants across all aspects of Irish society through increased focus on social inclusion measures, improved access to public services and targeted action to address racism and xenophobia.

The current Strategy was due to come to an end in 2020. However, in recognition of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of the Strategy, I made a decision to extend the Strategy to conclude in 2021. I continue to chair the regular meetings of the Strategy steering and monitoring committee.

An independent evaluation of a number of equality strategies due to conclude this year will be commissioned shortly by my Department and this will inform the next steps in terms of future equality strategies. I intend that a consultation process to develop a new strategic policy for migrant integration will begin early in 2022.

### **Asylum Seekers**

757. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the current position regarding the resettlement of further Afghan refugees in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42248/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I can confirm to the Deputy that some 280 places have been made available for humanitarian cases from Afghanistan through the Irish Refugee Protection Programme, and that this matter will be kept under review.

### **Health Promotion**

758. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the steps he is taking to address excessive consumption of unhealthy foods in preschool settings particularly in relation to celebrations (details supplied); if guidance has been issued to preschools on the consumption of unhealthy foods; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42307/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Department of Health is in the process of finalising a new set of Nutrition Standards for Early Learning and Care settings in consultation with my Department. These

Standards are due for publication in early October.

In advance of publication, the issue of consumption of unhealthy foods referenced during certain celebrations are addressed within the Standards. The following is an extract from the Standards relating to parties and celebrations:

#### 4.2 Celebrations, trips and rewards

It is recognised that there are instances where the food provided varies due to the location or the nature of the occasion such as field trips and birthday celebrations. Food provided on these days still needs to comply with the Standards. Please consider non-food treats to mark these occasions.

##### Dealing with birthdays

In a large service a birthday may be celebrated every couple of days. If children fill up on cakes and treat foods they will have little room left for the nutritious food that they need. It is important to celebrate and mark birthdays so here are tips on dealing with them

- Mark the occasion with fun games and activities rather than foods
- If a parent insists that a cake is sent to the service ask them to keep it small and keep servings for children to bite size amounts. Send leftovers home with the parent.
- If a number of birthday fall on the one week consider marking them together.

### Early Childhood Care and Education

759. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the estimated cost of increasing each of the income thresholds in the NCS by 20% and by 50%. [42324/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The National Childcare Scheme offers a statutory entitlement to financial support for childcare. The Scheme established an equitable and progressive system of universal and income-related subsidies. Subsidy rates are tailored based on individual circumstances, such as reckonable family income, child’s age and their educational stage.

The current income thresholds under the NCS, are a minimum of €26,000 and a maximum of €60,000. This equates to an annual cost of €202.5M.

In increasing the income thresholds by 20% the minimum would increase to €31,200 and the maximum to €72,000. This would equate to an approximate annual cost of €240.5M.

In increasing the income thresholds by 50% the minimum would increase to €39,000 and the maximum to €90,000. This would equate to an annual cost of approximately €309.6M.

The NCS is designed to be flexible, allowing income thresholds, maximum hours and subsidy rates to be adjusted in line with Government decisions.

### Early Childhood Care and Education

760. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integra-

tion and Youth the cost of increasing the rates of payment per hour on the NCS by 10% and by 20%. [42325/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The National Childcare Scheme established the removal of many of the restrictive eligibility requirements associated with legacy schemes, for example dependency on Social Protection payments. This represents a significant step forward in combatting poverty traps for families in Ireland.

The universal subsidy is available to all families with children aged between 24 weeks and 36 months (or until the child qualifies for the Early Childhood Care and Education programme if later). The universal subsidy is based on the child’s age, and not on income. Parents do not have to undergo an assessment to avail of this subsidy. The universal subsidy currently provides 50c per hour towards the cost of a registered childcare place up to a maximum of 45 hours a week.

The income-assessed subsidy under the NCS is available to all families with children aged between 24 weeks and 15 years, with a reckonable income under €60,000. The subsidies are based on the child’s age and education stage.

The table hereunder outlines the current cost per hour and, the cost of increasing the rates of payment per hour on the NCS by 10% and by 20%.

-	Current	10% increase	20% increase
Less than 12 months	€5.10	€5.61	€6.12
12 to 35 months old	€4.35	€4.78	€5.22
3 years, or older and not yet qualifying for ECCE	€3.95	€4.34	€4.82
3 years, or older and qualifying for ECCE	€3.95	€4.34	€4.82
At school (older than 6 years and less than 15 years)	€3.75	€4.12	€4.50
Universal	€0.50	€0.55	€0.60
Total	€206.3m	€226.5	€250.9

The funding model of the NCS is based on key assumptions around the preferences and behaviours of parents relating to working hours and childcare choice, rates of growth in demand, and certain metrics are extrapolated from available data.

The NCS is designed to be flexible and highly inclusive, and aims to meet the needs of those families who need it the most. The Scheme is based on the principle of progressive universalism and has regard to the best interests of children.

### Early Childhood Care and Education

761. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the total cost of AIM services; and the cost per child assisted in each of the programmes provided under AIM. [42326/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** AIM is a programme of supports to enable children with a disability to access and meaningfully participate in the ECCE programme. It includes 7 levels of progressive support, moving from the universal to the targeted. AIM supports are available through mainstream pre-school settings that are funded through the ECCE Programme.

AIM has seven levels of progressive support, moving from universal supports (levels 1-3) to targeted supports (levels 4-7), based on the needs of the child and the pre-school setting they

are attending.

Universal supports (Levels 1-3):

- Level 1, which aims to embed an inclusive culture in services, includes the national inclusion policy and guidelines for ECCE, the funding of the Leadership for Inclusion (LINC) training programme, the establishment of Inclusion Co-Ordinator (INCO) roles in ECCE settings, and a small increase in capitation of €2 per registered ECCE child for services with qualified Inclusion Co-ordinators.

- Level 2 involves provision of information for parents and providers on AIM, through the AIM.gov.ie website and information provided by County/City Childcare Committees.

- Level 3 recognises the requirement to continue to develop a qualified workforce that can confidently meet the needs of all children participating in the ECCE Programme. Supports include funding of training courses such as Hanen, Lámh and Sensory Processing E-Learning (SPEL).

Targeted supports (Levels 4-7):

- Level 4 addresses the needs of early learning and care practitioners to have timely access to advice and support from experts in early learning and care (and disability in particular) to assist them meet each child's needs.

- Level 5 recognises that some children require specialised equipment, appliances, assistive technology and/or that some early learning and care settings may require minor structural alterations to ensure children with a disability can participate in the ECCE programme. Supports include grants for equipment and some minor capital building works.

- Level 6 provides access to therapeutic supports where they are critical to enable a child be enrolled, and fully participate, in the ECCE programme.

- Level 7: Additional assistance in the pre-school room involves additional capitation for service providers where an application process has demonstrated that supports at Level 1-6 have not, or will not, by themselves, meet the child's needs. Funding can be used by the provider to buy in additional support, or reduce the staff / child ratio, supporting the pre-school leader to ensure the child's optimal participation.

In total, 15,509 children have so far benefitted from targeted AIM supports since AIM began in 2016.

The total AIM budget for 2021 is €48m. However, in 2020, the number of approvals for additional assistance under Level 7 of AIM fell to 2,868, compared to the previous year of 4,657 due to service providers availing instead of Covid-19 financial support through the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) and we expect the expenditure in 2021 also to be lower than budgeted because of the EWSS.

AIM Level 1 spending is based on the number of INCOs, with the payment calculated on the basis of children in the ECCE programme supported by the INCO, at a rate of €2 additional capitation per child per week. Expenditure on Level 1 for the pre-school year 2020/21 was €5.6m.

AIM Level 5 expenditure on equipment and minor alterations was approximately €500,000 over the pre-school year 2020/21. During this time, 222 children were supported, with average spending per child of €2,251.

AIM Level 7 expenditure during the pre-school year was €15.8m, averaging a cost per child in relation to whom additional assistance was approved of €5,543. This figure is based on either €210 per week to enable a service to supplement their staffing by 15 hours per week, or €140 to supplement their staffing by 10 additional staff hours per week. AIM Level 7 additional capitation can also be approved on a pro rata basis where there is a clear justification for doing so (e.g. the child cannot attend the service on a full-time basis or other supports are available on a part-time basis).

Other levels of AIM, such as training for practitioners, are not calculated on a per-child basis.

### Early Childhood Care and Education

762. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of children in each of the age categories supported under NCS; and the cost per child in each of those age categories. [42327/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The introduction of the National Childcare Scheme was a landmark moment for making high quality childcare more affordable and accessible to families in Ireland.

There are two subsidies available under the NCS. The universal subsidy is available to all families with children aged between 24 weeks and 36 months (or until the child qualifies for the Early Childhood Care and Education programme if later). The universal subsidy is based on the child’s age, and is not means tested. This subsidy provides up to €22.50 per week.

The income assessed subsidy is available to families with children aged between 24 weeks and 15 years with a reckonable income below €26,000. Subsidy rates are based on the child’s age and education stage, and taper downwards from €5.10 per hour.

The table below outlines the number of children in each of the age categories supported under the NCS and the average weekly cost as of July 2021.

Age Bracket	No. of Children	Average Weekly Value
Under 12 months	1,373	€79.89
1-2 years	9,528	€55.67
2-3 years	12,698	€62
3-4 years	9,347	€63.36
4-5 years	4,693	€81.16
5-6 years	2,991	€77.60
6-7 years	2,119	€77.41
7-8 years	1,605	€76.84
8-9 years	1,192	€75.47
9-10 years	959	€73.98
10-11 years	679	€78.90
11-12 years	428	€77.46
12-13 years	229	€81.55
13-14 years	56	€86.88
14-15 years	13	€100.09
Total	44,934	€66.24

### Early Childhood Care and Education

763. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of children supported under NCS in each of the income bands; and the average cost per child. [42328/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The National Childcare Scheme offers a statutory entitlement to financial support for childcare. The NCS established an equitable and progressive system of universal and income-related subsidies for children up to the age of 15.

An **income assessed subsidy** is payable for children from 24 weeks to 15 years of age who are availing of childcare services from an approved childcare service provider. The level of subsidy is determined by the family’s assessable income (i.e. gross income minus tax, PRSI and other deductibles and minus any applicable multiple child discount).

The table hereunder outlines the number of children supported in each on the income bands and the average weekly claim as of July 2021.

Income Band	No. of Children	Average weekly claim
€0-€4,999	2,080	€119.20
€5000-€9,999	762	€119.07
€10,000-€14,999	2,384	€112.76
€15,000-€19,999	2,999	€117.06
€20,000-€24,999	3,472	€119.55
€25,000-€29,999	3,898	€112.42
€30,000-€34,999	3,598	€98.60
€35,000-€39,999	3,332	€80.77
€40,000-€44,999	3,130	€65.27
€45,000-€49,999	2,845	€49.18
€50,000-€54,999	2,363	€33.17
€55,000-€60,000	15,706	€18.26
Total	44,934	€66.24

The NCS provides a sustainable platform to enable my department to continue investing in early learning and childcare for years to come. The Scheme is designed to be flexible, allowing income thresholds, maximum hours and subsidy rates to be adjusted as more investment becomes available.

### Early Childhood Care and Education

764. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the estimated cost of doubling the universal childcare payment payable up to 36 months without means assessment; and the estimated number who will receive same. [42332/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The introduction of the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) was a landmark moment for making high quality childcare more affordable and accessible to families in Ireland. It entails a fundamental shift away from subsidies grounded in social protection entitlements, and towards a comprehensive and progressive system of universal and income-based subsidies.

The universal subsidy is available to all families with children aged between 24 weeks and 36 months (or until the child qualifies for the Early Childhood Care and Education programme if later). The universal subsidy is based on the child's age, and not on income. Parents do not have to undergo an assessment to avail of this subsidy.

The universal subsidy currently provides 50c per hour towards the cost of a registered child-care place up to a maximum of 45 hours a week. The current cost of this subsidy is €22.50 per week, which costs €11 million per year. Doubling this would amount to €45 per week which in turn, would equate to an annual cost of €23 million.

As the universal subsidy is underpinned by age, an increase in payment does not increase eligibility. There are currently 11,000 children on universal. The cost modelling reflects a maximum universal participation rate of approximately 15,800. Increases to the value of universal payments may add 3-400 children to this number based on increased incentives to avail of the higher subsidy.

### **Child and Family Agency**

765. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the estimated cost of extending aftercare supports to persons up until the age of 26 years. [42333/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** Tusla will support young adult's in education until 21 years of age or 23 if continuing in education. In terms of aftercare allowance being extended until young adult's reach 26 years of age this would result in payment of additional three years of an allowance for each client or €46,800 for each aftercare client.

At the end of quarter 4 2020 there was 1,697 young adults aged 18-22 whom were eligible to receive an aftercare allowance. To process payment for an additional three years for this number of young adults would cost €26,473,200 per annum and thus €79,419,600 for three years.

It's worth noting this additional cost would be borne out over a number of years due to the current age profile of young adults at present. It should also be noted that this figure is exclusive of the social work cost involved.

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

766. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if the Covid-19 guidelines for early childhood settings have required children to use single-use items which must be disposed of as waste each day; and if the use of plastic disposable items has been suggested in circumstances in which there would be a clear conflict with the ban on single-use items. [42337/21]

770. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his Department has issued advice to the pre-school sector in relation to protocols to be followed in the coming months during the Covid-19 pandemic; if it is the case that only disposable ziplock bags and plastic bottles are to be used by children which should be disposed of every day; if he considers these practices to be environmentally friendly; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42387/21]

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

**O’Gorman):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 766 and 770 together.

Expert guidance on the safe operation of Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) services during the COVID-19 pandemic was published by the HSE’s Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) in May 2020 and has been updated on a number of occasions since then, most recently on 30 August 2021. The guidance is available at [www.hpsc.ie/a-z/lifestages/childcare/](http://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/lifestages/childcare/).

In line with normal infection prevention and control practice in ELC and SAC services, the HPSC guidance sets out that staff should wear disposable, single-use plastic aprons, and non-powdered, non-permeable gloves when there is a risk of coming into contact with body fluids (such as when nappy changing).

The HPSC has also advised that services should keep a small supply of surgical masks in a readily accessible place for use by a staff member who develops symptoms of COVID-19, or by staff members caring for a sick child who is waiting to be collected by a parent.

In addition to the expert guidance from the HPSC, my Department has provided a range of online resources and guidance to support service providers, practitioners and parents. These resources are available at <https://first5.gov.ie/guidance>.

The guidance provided by the HPSC does not include any advice on the use of disposable ziplock bags and plastic bottles and my Department has not issued any guidance recommending the use of ziplock bags and plastic bottles.

### Direct Provision System

767. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of persons currently in direct provision. [42347/21]

773. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of persons in the direct provision system for less than six and between six and 12 months; the number in excess of one, two, three, four, five, six and seven years, respectively; the corresponding figures for children;; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42533/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 767 and 773 together.

As of 07 September 2021, a total of 6,478 people are recorded by my Department as being resident in accommodation provided by the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS), of whom 1,692 are children. This includes people who are resident in Direct Provision centres and in temporary accommodation in hotels and guesthouses.

The table below shows the number of people in accommodation broken down by their length of stay and whether they are an adult or a child.

Time Spent	Adult	Child	Total
0-5 Months	408	114	522
6-12 months	496	110	606
1+ years	1240	428	1668
2+ years	1180	454	1634

Time Spent	Adult	Child	Total
3+ years	591	294	885
4+ years	311	127	438
5+ years	309	108	417
6+ years	157	28	185
7+years	94	29	123
Grand Total	4786	1692	6478

These figures represent continuous periods of residence and cannot reflect interrupted residential periods where the person may have left IPAS accommodation and returned at a later stage. In addition, these figures only relate to persons who have registered with the International Protection Office (IPO) and do not reflect children resident in the centres who may not have been registered by their parents.

The length of time a person stays in state provided accommodation generally reflects the length of time taken to reach a final conclusion on their application for international protection or other permission to reside in the State and may also include applications to revoke Deportation Orders. As the application process also allows for legal challenges against negative decisions at many stages of the process, the time taken to finalise many cases can be prolonged.

As of the end of August 2021, there are also 1,185 residents with an international protection status or a permission to remain in the State, residing in accommodation centres provided by my Department.

Considerable work is being undertaken to support these residents to move out of accommodation centres and into secure accommodation in the community. My Department has a specific team in IPAS who work in collaboration with a number of key stakeholders to collectively support residents with status, or a permission to remain, to access housing options.

These stakeholders include; Depaul Ireland, the Peter McVerry Trust, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the City and County Managers Association.

### Direct Provision System

768. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of persons currently residing in direct provision centres in the State who have qualified for refugee status but continue to reside in direct provision centres. [42348/21]

769. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the supports or assistance programmes, services or phonelines available to persons who have qualified for refugee status to help them move out of direct provision centres. [42349/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 768 and 769 together.

International Protection applicants who have been granted an International Protection status (refugee status or subsidiary protection status) or granted a permission to remain, have the same access to housing supports and services as Irish and EEA nationals. As of the end of August 2021, there were 1,185 persons who have been granted status and currently reside in accommodation centres provided by my Department.

Significant work is undertaken to support these residents in moving out of accommodation centres and into secure accommodation in the community. My Department has a specific team in the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) who work in collaboration with a number of stakeholders to collectively support residents with status, or a permission to remain, to access housing options.

Stakeholders include; Depaul Ireland, the Peter McVerry Trust (PMVT), the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the City and County Managers Association.

All residents who are successful with their application to the Minister for Justice for a protection status or a permission to remain, are notified by letter by IPAS of the supports available to them and of the contact details of their support workers. These services are funded by my Department. Contact details for housing support workers are also posted in each accommodation centre and are readily available from the centre managers.

On a continuous basis a number of clinics (which provide information on housing options) are held for persons with a form of status. The clinics are held in accommodation centres with both IPAS staff and Depaul/PMVT support workers.

While the supports mentioned here are made available to all residents who have been granted a status, it is always open to them and any other residents to make their own arrangements for accommodation at any time, if they so wish, and many do so.

*Question No. 769 answered with Question No. 768.*

*Question No. 770 answered with Question No. 766.*

### Direct Provision System

771. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the breakdown of the estimated €115 million (details supplied) current spending related to implementing the new direct provision system; the number of budgetary cycles the spending will be take place over; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42429/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a New International Protection Support Service (published in February 2021) provides preliminary estimates of per annum current expenditure required for the implementation of the new model of accommodation and supports for international protection applicants. Current expenditure requirements will continue to be developed as part of the detailed implementation planning process for the introduction of the new system. The breakdown of the figures referred to in the question is supplied in the below tables. These figures are included in the White Paper at pages 95 to 100 inclusive.

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth	
Phase One Reception & Integration Centres	Estimated Cost
Accommodation per annum for 2,000 individuals (including food, utilities, wifi; furnishings, maintenance).	€22m
Childcare in Phase 1 (4 months) based on the National Childcare Scheme sponsor rates for children in IRPP reception centres	€1.7m
Operating costs for Reception & Integration Centres, including integration support case-workers	€3.4m
Maintenance Costs	€2.0m
Total	€29.1m

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Phase Two Accommodation in the Community for up to 14 months	PercentageAccommodated	Expenditure	Percentage of total costs
Approved Housing Bodies or other Not-for-Profit Housing Bodies (families and single applicants, approx 1,400 persons)	40%	€1.4m	17%
AHB for 1,750 vulnerable persons.	50%	€1.8m	22%
Other Accommodation Strands (families and single applicants, approx 350 persons)	10%	€0.2m	2%
House soft furnishings for families and single persons under the FEAD	-	€0.05m	Less than 1%
Support to assist 'kitting out' a new International Protection home	-	€4.8m	58%
Total	100%	€8.3m	100%

Childcare	Expenditure	Percentage of total
Childcare in Phase 2 (12 months)	€5.8m	71%
Tusla Phase 2 (12 months)	€1.9m	23%
ECCE grant Phase 2 (12 months)	€0.5m	6%
Total	€8.2m	100%

Income Support Payments	Expenditure	Percentage of total
Income Support (12 months)	€34.2m	86%
International Protection Child Payment	€1.6m	4%
Housing Assistance Equivalent Payment	€3.5m	9%
Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (250 x €150)+(250 x €275) Phase One	€0.1m	Less than 1%
Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (250 x €150)+(250 x €275) Phase Two	€0.1m	Less than 1%
Return to school kits under the FEAD programme	€0.04m	Less than 1%
Total	€39.5m	100%

Employment Services	Expenditure	Percentage of total
Outreach	€1m	100%

Phase One Integration Programme	Expenditure	Percentage of total
Development and Testing	€0.2m	100%

Integration Support Workers – Phase Two	Expenditure	Percentage of total
Resettlement Workers x 30, Intercultural Workers x 30	€4m	44%
Training and Support rollout	€0.05m	Less than 1%
Integration Funding	€5m	55%
Total	€9.05m	100%

Vulnerable People Programme	Expenditure	Percentage of total
Supported Accommodation for Vulnerable People – NGO managed (approx 1750 persons)	€19.1m	94%
Integration support programme	€0.6m	3%
Trauma programme	€0.6m	3%
Total	€20.3m	100%

Staffing Year 1 of the new model	Expenditure	Percentage of total
Transition Team	€1.2m	100%

### Department of Social Protection Current Expenditure

Area	Expenditure	Percentage of total
Daily Expenses Allowance Phase One (4 months in Reception and Integration Centre)	€3.7m	95%
Staffing Phase Two (Administering income supports on behalf of DCEDIY)	€0.2m	5%
Total	€3.9m	100%

### Department of Education Current Expenditure

Area	Expenditure	Percentage of total
Primary and post primary	€8.9m	100%

### Department of Further and Higher Education Research Innovation and Science Current Expenditure

Area	Expenditure	Percentage of total
English Language Provision Phase One (6 months)	€8.5m	85%
English Language Provision Phase Two (12 months)	€1.5m	15%
Higher Education Student Support Scheme	€0.03m	Less than 1%
Total	€10m	100%

### Department of Justice

Area	Expenditure	Percentage of total
Salary Costs	€12.1m	41%
Operational Costs	€8.6m	29%
Legal Aid Board	€8.8m	30%
Total	€29.5m	100%

### Department of Health/HSE

Area	Expenditure	Percentage of total
Current Health Care Costs	€8.4m	100%
Total	€8.4m	100%

### Early Childhood Care and Education

772. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth his advice on a matter (details supplied) in relation to the opening of a preschool; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42505/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** As the Deputy’s question relates to an operational matter for Tusla, I have referred the matter to Tusla for a direct reply.

*Question No. 773 answered with Question No. 767.*

### **Rights of the Child**

774. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth his plans to ratify the second optional protocol of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; the details of the outstanding issues that need to be resolved by the Government to enable ratification [42542/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I would like to reiterate my ongoing commitment to the ratification of the Optional Protocol.

My Department made a comprehensive submission to the Attorney General’s Office in 2019 seeking confirmation as to whether Ireland was in a position to ratify the Second Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The advice received from the AGO stated that while Ireland is largely compliant with the terms of the Protocol, there are some outstanding issues that need to be resolved before the State can proceed to ratification.

My Department has been liaising closely with the Department of Justice and Equality as the outstanding issues identified by the AGO fall within their remit.

The Department of Justice is giving consideration as to what legislative measures may need to be put in place to ensure that the full range of offences covered by the Protocol can be prosecuted on an organised and transnational basis. The aim is to resolve any outstanding issues so that we can move towards the ratification of this important international treaty at the earliest opportunity.

### **Child Abuse**

775. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his attention and that of Tusla has been drawn to cases of abuse at a school (details supplied) in Dublin 1; if he and or Tusla have engaged with the school and or the Jesuit Order in respect of the ongoing inquiry; the steps he and Tusla have taken to contact past victims; and if he will outline the supports he has made available. [42553/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Tusla, the Child and Family Agency’s, primary concern is the immediate protection of children. Their work in relation to retrospective cases, reported to them, offers support to survivors and ensures there is no current risk to other children.

The cases of abuse, in Belvedere College in the 1970’s, have been brought to my attention. Tusla confirm that no referrals were made at any time in respect of either of the two teachers as ‘Persons Subject to Allegations of Abuse’ (PSAA). Both individuals are deceased. Tusla cannot assess cases where PSAAs are deceased as there is no ‘current risk to children’.

The Jesuit Society of Ireland recently published the PSAA names and encouraged former students who may have suffered abuse to come forward. Subsequently, other referrals (arising out of the publication of PSAA names) have been made to Tusla by the Jesuit Society. Where cases meet the threshold for assessment, they are dealt with under Tusla’s 2014 Policy and Pro-

cedures for Responding to Allegations of Abuse and Neglect and if sought Tusla advises and directs people towards appropriate counselling services.

I am aware that the Jesuit Society is currently conducting an enquiry into the allegations of sexual abuse by the former teachers at the school. The Society has appointed a Child Safeguarding Manager in the Jesuit Safeguarding Office as a confidential contact for anyone with information in relation to these or other cases of abuse.

I welcome the Order's apology and current actions to address these matters. I encourage any person who has experienced abuse, or has reason to believe that a child is at risk of abuse, to speak to Tusla, or the Gardaí.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

776. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the steps being taken to facilitate remote working within his Department in particular to encourage remote working for those who live in the regions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42701/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** My Department is currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

### **Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries**

777. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if information is available to persons who were born in a mother and baby home (details supplied) during a particular year in relation to whether or not medical trials were carried out on children who were born at the location; and if so, if records of the children involved exist; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42722/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** On 28 February last, with the dissolution of the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation, my Department became the data controller for all the personal data contained in the records and databases that transferred from the Commission.

Former residents of Mother and Baby Homes including the former residents of Bessborough can make a Subject Access Request (SAR) to my Department for access to their record. My Department operates a dedicated telephone information line to provide information to callers on procedures for making SARs. Information is also available on my Department's website, including a Guide which provides responses to Frequently Asked Questions.

In lawfully processing the data in the archive to date, my officials have become aware of some data in the archive relating to trials. I would therefore encourage persons who wish to know more about data relating to them in the archive to make a SAR.

Once a SAR is received by my Department, the identity of the requestor is verified and the SAR is then processed. Individuals will be provided with the data that is in the archive relating

to them and the data provided may include information on medical trials where there is such information in the archive relating to them. My Department can also advise individuals about other appropriate channels to obtain information about themselves from the archive.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

778. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the way in which his Department and public bodies and agencies under his remit are accommodating requests for persons to work from home. [42751/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** My Department is currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

### **Departmental Budgets**

779. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will create a capital budget line to build playgrounds in areas that do not have same. [42773/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Every year since 2013, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (previously Department of Children and Youth) has provided Local Authorities with the opportunity to apply for funding for the refurbishment or development of new and existing play facilities for children and young people through DCEDIY Play and Recreation Capital Grant Scheme.

Under the Scheme, each of the 31 Local Authorities can make one application with a maximum of 3 projects for the refurbishment of existing playgrounds or development of a new playground. This year, applications were received from all 31 Local Authorities for 52 projects and a total of €450,000 was awarded by my Department.

Criteria for the Scheme are developed in partnership with the Local Authority Play and Recreation Network (LAPRN), established for the purpose of bringing a focus on play and recreation within each Local Authority.

Anyone interested in proposing the development of a new playground in their area should liaise with their LAPRN Member in order to work with them so that the project can be considered by them as part of their application for funding under the DCEDIY Play and Recreation Capital Grant Scheme in future years.

### **Child and Family Agency**

780. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth his response to HIQA’s report on Tusla’s Child Protection and Welfare Services in Cork. [42774/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Inspections, both by HIQA and Tusla’s Practice Assurance and Service Improvement team, identify effective service delivery, areas where improvement is required and emerging risks within services.

The recently published HIQA inspection report of Tusla Child Protection and Welfare Services in Cork included findings that:

- The service was not compliant with any of the standards inspected
- Staff shortages were a significant challenge for the area’s service delivery. Lack of social workers was a common theme in the inspection, and the impact of lack of resources was reflected in the area’s capacity to provide a service in line with standards.
- Despite staff shortages there was good practice within the service
- The majority of children and families who were asked about their experiences by the inspectors spoke positively and fairly about the social workers they met and the service they received
- Children and families said changing social workers and having several social workers was difficult for them
- Governance and oversight mechanisms within the area needed to improve

Tusla has put in place an action plan. This plan has been accepted by HIQA. The progress of the plan is being closely monitored by Tusla. My Department will continue to liaise with Tusla senior management regarding quality improvement and risk management in the Agency.

In 2019 my Department established the Social Work Education Group (SWEG), with key stakeholders from social work employers (including Tusla), the higher education sector and representative bodies. The goal of the group is to increase the number of social work graduates from Irish universities.

In March 2021, Tusla offered employment to all suitably qualified graduates. Following a recruitment process, 110 new graduates were offered roles within the Agency.

Following representations by the DCEDIY and other stakeholders to the IDG on Economic Migration, and the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment, social workers were removed from the ‘ineligible occupations list’. Social Workers from outside the EU/EEA are eligible to apply for an employment permit since June 2021.

Tusla has recruited two additional Social Work Team Leaders in the Cork area and is committed to continuous improvement in service delivery to children and families. My Department will continue to closely monitor progress in this area.

### **Departmental Reviews**

781. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the status of the review of the Equal Status Acts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42909/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I have asked officials in my Department to undertake a review of the Equality

Acts (Equal Status Acts 2000-2018 and the Employment Equality Acts 1998-2015) which will examine the functioning of the Acts and their effectiveness in combatting discrimination and promoting equality.

The review will include the existing Programme for Government commitments on the introduction of a socio-economic ground for discrimination and to ensure that transgender, non-conforming and intersex people have explicit protection within the equality grounds.

As a first step in the review, I have launched a consultation process inviting submissions on a range of issues including the functioning of the Acts and their effectiveness in combatting discrimination and promoting equality; awareness of the legislation; and whether there are obstacles to taking an action under the Acts. Submissions are also invited on the scope of the current definitions of the nine equality grounds. The closing date for submissions is 29 October 2021 at 5pm.

The outcome of the consultation process will inform the next steps to be undertaken as part of the review and may involve further consultation.

### **Government Communications**

782. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his Ministerial phones have been hacked or attempted to be hacked during the term of office. [42919/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** ICT services are provided to the Department by the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO). The provision of ICT security is part of that service.

The Department engages closely with the OGCIO on the issue of cyber security, who in turn engage with the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) to ensure best practice is followed as it relates to all aspects of cyber security, including hacking threats.

For operational and security reasons, the NCSC has advised not to disclose details of systems and processes which could in any way compromise those efforts. In particular, it is not considered appropriate to disclose information which might assist criminals to identify potential vulnerabilities in departmental cyber security arrangements. Therefore it is not considered appropriate to disclose particular arrangements in place in relation to cyber security tools and services.

My Department does not comment on operational security matters.

### **Government Communications**

783. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he has ever used his personal phones for Government business; and if so, if the personal phones have been hacked during his term of office. [42937/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I can confirm that I am not aware of any instance of ‘hacking’ or any unauthorised access to or unauthorised retrieval of information from my personal phone. I have on occasion used my personal phone to communicate with other Government Ministers via call and text message.

## Freedom of Information

784. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of freedom of information requests responded to by his Department in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; the number of responses that included documents related to text messages and other phone message communications such as messages sent through an application (details supplied) in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42959/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Since the establishment of my Department in June 2020, my Department received 96 Freedom of Information requests in 2020 and 160 to date in 2021. When releasing records on foot of these requests, the format of communications referred to by the Deputy did not form part of any responses issued.

## Children in Care

785. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of relative and non-relative carers, respectively approved in each month for the past 36 months by Tusla area. [43011/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

## Children in Care

786. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of private foster placements in each of the past 36 months by Tusla area. [43012/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

## Government Communications

787. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he and or his special advisers and or officials use or have used services (details supplied) to communicate in the past 18 months. [43066/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I can confirm that neither myself, my special advisers nor my senior officials use the services described on Departmental devices to communicate. I have used one of the named services to communicate with other Green Party TDs on party matters on my personal phone.

## Domestic Violence

788. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when his Department will publish legislative proposals for paid leave relating to domestic violence as agreed on 8 December 2020. [43164/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Since its formation, this Government has made clear that tackling domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is a priority. The Programme for Government contains a commitment to investigate the provision of paid leave and social protection provision to victims of domestic violence with a view to establishing a statutory entitlement to paid domestic violence leave.

My Department is currently finalising policy proposals for consideration by Government and has examined both international models of domestic violence leave and best practice in this regard. It has researched the development of a suitable model for rollout in Ireland.

My Department has also engaged in a targeted consultation process with relevant stakeholders and social partners to examine how a scheme of paid leave should operate to address the needs of victims most effectively, including with the monitoring committee of the Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence, employers’ groups and trade unions and with stakeholders of the National Equality Strategy Committees falling under my Department’s remit.

A report is being prepared based on this work which will be brought to Government in the coming weeks. The report will include recommendations on how best to support employees experiencing domestic abuse, including leave.

### **Carer’s Leave**

789. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if consideration has been given to the possibility of extending carer’s leave for employees across all sectors; if he has investigated such a measure to the point by which costings have been calculated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43188/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Section 6 of the Carer’s Leave Act 2001 provides that employees with at least one year’s continuous service are entitled to take up to 104 weeks of carer’s leave to enable them to provide full-time care and attention to a person who is in need of such care.

The 2001 Act provides, as part of its definition of employee, ‘a person of any age, who has entered into or works under (or, where the employment has ceased, entered into or worked under) a contract of employment’. The application of the Act is not limited by economic sector.

Carer’s Leave is unpaid but an employee may also qualify for Carer’s Benefit or Carer’s Allowance, the payment of which is a matter for the Minister for Social Protection.

### **Departmental Funding**

790. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the funding streams within his Department which may be of potential assistance to ongoing fundraising effort outlined in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43195/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Funding for the provision of youth services is administered on behalf of my Department by the Education and Training Boards, which allocate funding for local youth clubs and services via applications to the UBU Your Place Your Space the Local Youth Club Grant schemes. Funding of almost €42 million will be made available under UBU Your Place This Space in 2021 while over €2 million will be made available under the Local Youth Club Grant scheme this year

During the unprecedented periods of restrictions due to Covid-19, all of the youth funding provided by this Department has been maintained fully. This includes funding provided to national youth organisations, to local targeted youth services under UBU Your Place Your Space, and to youth clubs. In 2021, I secured an increase in 2021 for youth services, including an increase for Scouting Ireland.

In addition, funding has been made available through the Local Youth Clubs Grants Scheme and through the Covid-19 Small Grant Scheme. This funding can be accessed by local scouting organisations through their ETB.

My officials are in regular contact with youth sector representatives in relation to the impact of the Covid-19 restrictions, and will continue to work closely with youth organisations in monitoring the overall situation.

In this instance, the group in contact may wish to contact their local Education and Training Board to assess their eligibility for funding.

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

791. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the potential funding streams within his Department, Pobal or by alternative means to support the establishment of a pre-school for ECCE classes as outlined in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43197/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** My Department administers an annual capital funding programme, under which early learning and care and school aged childcare services which are registered with Tulsa can access capital funding.

The purpose or target of the funding is determined on an annual basis having regard to the needs of children, families and service providers and Departmental priorities.

There is no specific capital funding available for development works in 2021.

However, there are a number of supports which childcare providers, and intending childcare providers, can access.

My Department funds City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) who offer a wide variety of supports to parents and childcare providers, including advice on setting up a childcare business, information on grants and low cost local enterprise loans which may be available to services, as well as commercial borrowing. The CCC’s also offer support on applying for the various funding schemes administered by my Department. Contact details for all of the CCCs are available at *myccc.ie*.

## Departmental Strategies

792. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he has plans to introduce the necessary learning opportunities within third-level education facilities in terms of artificial intelligence and the ever changing research field in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41442/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Since 2016, the Irish Research Council has funded fifty-eight awards in the area of artificial intelligence at a total cost of €6.7 million. These awards were funded under the Government of Ireland Postdoctoral Fellowship Programme, the Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship Programme, New Foundations, Employment-Based Postgraduate Programme, Enterprise Partnership Scheme, Laureate Awards, COALESCE Research Fund and CHIST-ERA.

Springboard+ 2021 was launched on 14th June 2021, there is a combined total of 13,444 places on 408 courses available in the 2021/22 academic year under Springboard+ 2021 and HCI Pillar 1. This year, there is a broad range of courses in the area of Artificial Intelligence. Please find attached numbers of participants on existing courses in the area of Artificial Intelligence, including Springboard+ and HCI Pillar 1. Courses for Springboard+ and HCI Pillar 1 2021/22 will commence from the autumn so these are proposed numbers.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq792-09-09-21\_en.xlsx">SRS Enrolment and Graduate numbers</a>]

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq792a-09-09-21\_en.xlsx">Springboard+</a>]

## Covid-19 Tests

793. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will provide further details in relation to the pilot programme on antigen testing his Department is conducting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41447/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The Government's intention is to strengthen the prevention and intervention measures around COVID-19 in response to the changing context including surveillance, track and trace, and potential use of new technology. My Department recognises the potential role of rapid antigen testing as one part of a package of surveillance and vigilance measures that could also include self-monitoring and other public health non-pharmaceutical interventions.

Following the establishment by the Minister for Health of an Expert Advisory Group on Rapid Testing, my Department wrote to the Group outlining steps already taken to pilot rapid testing initiatives in the further and higher education sector. My Department has requested the Group's early advice in determining the appropriate role for rapid testing and parameters around its usage in higher and further education settings

Among the steps already taken is the provision of support for an SFI-backed Study to test this objective. A new research project 'Multi-site study to develop a SARS-CoV-2 Infection Surveillance System for Third Level Students and Staff in the Republic of Ireland', known as UniCoV, began on June 14 across four universities and will be expanded to other sites in the

near future. It is expected that the study, comprising approximately 8000 staff and students, will provide valuable learning on the potential role rapid antigen testing can take in this sector.

My Department has also joined a HSE-led Pilot Project Working Group to pilot approaches for the operation of rapid testing in education settings. The purpose of these pilots is to examine the acceptability of the tests for individuals and the sites – i.e. can the site manage the process, do staff and students sign up and do they stick with it, do the tests pick up any positive cases and what, if any, are the unintended consequences. Secondary to this feasibility aspect is, following the pilots, determining whether the model is scalable and if so, what changes would need to be made to the process and what additional resources would be required.

These pilots have commenced and five further and higher education sites are participating in the study. My Department is supportive of HSE proposals to expand these pilot studies to further locations in the coming period. Institutions not currently involved have expressed their interest and there may be scope for clusters of institutions to participate within the same region. A site selection process is under way and will conclude shortly.

### **Apprenticeship Programmes**

794. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans in relation to third-level apprenticeships, lifelong learning and dealing with the growing demand for skilled workers in new industries such as environmental and digital. [41448/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** The response to COVID-19 has accelerated digital transformation, changing the nature and capabilities required for occupations. Upskilling and reskilling are a key Government priority to foster an inclusive recovery and to support the digital and green transitions, key commitments in the Programme for Government.

Lifelong learning lies at the heart of Ireland's and the EU's education and training policy and is acknowledged as being vital for sustainable economic growth, the restoration of employment, and fostering social cohesion. This recognition of the importance of lifelong learning is reflected in the targets set both nationally and at EU level for lifelong learning participation. Ireland's National Skills Strategy set a lifelong learning target of 10% to be reached by the year 2020 and 15% by 2025. In quarter 4 2020, approximately 302,300 adults aged 25-64 years had engaged in lifelong learning, representing a lifelong learning participation rate of 11.6%, this was a reduction on prior year's attainment caused by COVID-19 related measures.

Further Education and Training (FET) is primarily delivered or contracted by the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs), under the funding and strategic direction of SOLAS. FET offers a diverse range of programmes and supports designed to meet the needs of individuals at different stages of the learning pathway. Courses focused on foundation or transversal skills development, including literacy, numeracy and digital skills, build the core capabilities that allow participants to move on to more advanced learning opportunities with the aim of enabling every citizen to participate fully in society across their lifetime.

The new FET Strategy 2020-2024 recognises the key role that FET must play in helping to address the digital divide and provide learners with the core ICT skills to address digital literacy and commits to enhancing technology within FET to ensure that better use is made of digital technology for teaching and learning. There are a range of programmes available within FET for all persons who wish to develop their digital literacy. These programmes are integrated

into adult literacy and numeracy provision and are designed to meet the specific digital literacy needs of learners. As a result, they are generally organised on a one-to-one or small group basis.

A €225m investment package was announced as part of the Government's National Recovery and Resilience Plan, which includes a significant skills package for upskilling and reskilling aimed at equipping workers whose jobs are unlikely to return, including a focus on digital skills transition and a new Green Skills Action programme at further education level. A research and innovation National Grand Challenges Programme has also been launched which will focus on the need for a transition to a climate neutral and clean economy as well as the challenges of digital transition.

The Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025 launched on 19th April last sets out new ways of structuring, funding, and promoting apprenticeships to make apprenticeship accessible to employers and learners. The actions set out in the plan seek to deliver on a target of 10,000 apprenticeship registrations per annum by 2025.

Government is committed under the Action Plan for Apprenticeship to working with employers to promote, enable and support the recruitment of apprentices. Measures to support employer engagement in apprenticeship across all sectors of the economy, particularly within the SME sector, will be integral to the delivery of the target of 10,000 new apprentice registrations per annum by 2025. These measures encompass both financial and non-financial and will include an annual grant for employers not benefiting from the existing mechanism of State-funded craft apprentice training allowances for off-the-job training. This employer grant will be administered by the new National Apprenticeship Office (NAO) and the level of grant will be announced by year end.

Green skills are the heart of the Government's post-Covid recovery and regeneration plans. Near Zero Energy Building (NZEB) and retrofit programmes are currently provided in Waterford Wexford ETB, Laois Offaly ETB and Mount Lucas National Construction Training Centre with work ongoing to establish a further three centres of excellence in Cork, Limerick Clare and Mayo Sligo Leitrim ETBs.

At higher education level, in addition to core full time and part time programmes, funding is also provided under Springboard and the Human Capital Initiative for programmes which support the development of green skills, including professionals in areas such as Building Analysis and Climate Adaptation; Sustainable Building Technology and Retrofit, Conservation and Sustainability.

Additional demand for skills to support the transformation to Low Carbon Economy are being identified through the ongoing EGFSN study 'Skills for the Low Carbon Economy' which is due to be finalised in the coming period.

### **Grant Payments**

795. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of SUSI applications that were rejected on the basis that the pandemic unemployment payment brought their income over the threshold in each of the past 12 months. [41504/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The principal support provided by the Department in financial terms is the Student Grant Scheme. Under the scheme, grant assistance is awarded to students attending an approved course in an approved institution who meet the prescribed conditions of funding,

including those relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means.

The decision on eligibility for a student grant is a matter, in the first instance, for the centralised student grant awarding authority SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) to determine.

As in any statutory scheme, a core principle is that there is consistency of approach and an equitable treatment for applicants as part of the means assessment process. This applies to people who are dependent on different types of social protection payment.

The Pandemic Unemployment Payment has been treated as reckonable income since it was introduced in March 2020. Income from the Covid-19 payment therefore has the same standing and is treated in a similar fashion to other Department of Social Protection payments such as Jobseeker's Benefit or Jobseeker's Allowance.

A very important feature of the scheme that I would point to is the change of circumstances provision. If a student or party to their application experiences a change in circumstances that is not a temporary change and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, they can apply to SUSI to have their application assessed under the change in circumstances provision of the relevant Student Grant Scheme. The income of all parties to the application will be assessed or reassessed based on current income and applicants may also be asked to provide evidence of same. Such a change in circumstances would clearly include no longer being in receipt of a pandemic unemployment payment. Students will no longer receive the PUP from early September, in line with normal circumstances where students do not qualify for unemployment payments while at college.

An applicant can request a review by contacting the SUSI Support Desk at 0761 087 874 or emailing [support@susi.ie](mailto:support@susi.ie).

The information requested by the Deputy cannot be provided in the format required. When SUSI assesses an applicant's reckonable income, the totality of the income is examined. If the total income is found to exceed the income thresholds outlined in the legislation, the applicant is deemed ineligible due to their total income exceeding the income thresholds.

The Pandemic Unemployment Payment is only one component of an applicant's total reckonable income and it is not possible for SUSI to determine which component of the income results in the total income exceeding the threshold.

## Grant Payments

796. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of SUSI applications that were rejected in each of the past five years and to date in 2021. [41505/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The principal support provided by the Department in financial terms is the Student Grant Scheme. Under the scheme, grant assistance is awarded to students attending an approved course in an approved institution who meet the prescribed conditions of funding, including those relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means.

The decision on eligibility for a student grant is a matter, in the first instance, for the centralised student grant awarding authority SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) to determine.

The number of SUSI applications that were rejected in each of the past five years and to date in 2021 are as follows.

Academic year	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	*2021-22
Rejected	17,639	17,130	15,879	16,747	18,593	9,956

\*For the current academic year the application process for 2021-22 is still open. However, I can confirm that as of 5th September 2021, SUSI had received just over 88,000 applications and assessed just over 59,700 with just over 51,900 qualifying for grant support.

### Grant Payments

797. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of students who had their SUSI grant funding withdrawn from them mid-academic year in each of the past five years and to date in 2021. [41506/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The Student Grant Scheme is the principal support for students in financial terms by my Department. It provides grant assistance to eligible students attending approved full-time courses in approved further or higher educational institutions who meet the prescribed eligibility criteria of the relevant scheme.

The Scheme is administered on behalf of my Department by the national student grant awarding authority SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland), a business unit of CDET. Under the terms of the Student Grant Scheme, grant assistance is awarded to eligible students attending an approved course in an approved institution who meet the prescribed conditions of funding including those relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means.

During the academic year, new information can come to SUSI's attention which results in a student who was awarded funding being found to be ineligible. There are a number of reasons why this can occur including for example:

- An applicant does not register with their intended institution and so does not begin or attend their intended higher or further education course.
- An applicant registers for a different course to the course that was previously awarded e.g. an applicant was initially awarded to an approved course but is now attending a part-time course or private college or an applicant was initially awarded to a course which sees them progress in their education but is now attending a course at the same or lower level as previously attended.
- An applicant was awarded a fees grant only for a course within Ireland and is now attending a course overseas or a PLC course within the state where fee grants are not payable.
- An applicant is not progressing to the year of the course that the grant was awarded to.
- A renewal applicant confirms no change to their eligibility from the previous academic year on the application form but a change is subsequently found e.g. reckonable income is found to have increased.

The number of students who had their SUSI grant funding withdrawn from them mid-academic year in each of the past five years and to date in 2021 is as follows.

Academic Year 2021/22

For the current academic year the application process for 2021-22 is still open. However, I can confirm that as of 5th September 2021, SUSI had received just over 88,000 applications and assessed just over 59,700 with just over 51,900 qualifying for grant support.

#### Academic Year 2020/21

SUSI received over 100,000 applications in academic year 2020/21. Of these, 2,154 students who were initially awarded funding for academic year 2020/21 were found to be ineligible for funding during the academic year.

#### Academic Year 2019/20

SUSI received over 96,000 applications in academic year 2019/20. Of these, 1,807 students who were initially awarded funding for academic year 2019/20 were found to be ineligible for funding during the academic year.

#### Academic Year 2018/19

SUSI received almost 99,000 applications in academic year 2018/19. Of these, 1,838 students who were initially awarded funding for academic year 2018/19 were found to be ineligible for funding during the academic year.

#### Academic Year 2017/18

SUSI received over 103,000 applications in academic year 2017/18. Of these, 1,919 students who were initially awarded funding for academic year 2017/18 were found to be ineligible for funding during the academic year.

#### Academic Year 2016/17

SUSI received over 105,000 applications in academic year 2016/17. Of these, 1,766 students who were initially awarded funding for academic year 2016/17 were found to be ineligible for funding during the academic year.

### Grant Payments

798. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of students who applied for SUSI in each of the past five years and to date in 2021, by county. [41507/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The principal support provided by my Department in financial terms is the Student Grant Scheme. Under the terms of the Scheme, grant assistance is awarded to students attending an approved course in an approved institution who meet the prescribed conditions of funding, including those relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means.

The scheme is demand led and as such the numbers applying each year can change for reasons such as demographics, employment rates etc. The number of students who applied for SUSI in each of the past five years and to date in 2021, by county are as follows.

Home Address County	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22*
Dublin	20,184	20,178	19,657	19,328	21,012	18,752
Cork	11,193	10,958	10,355	9,948	10,377	9,005

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Home Address County	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22*
Galway	6,719	6,625	6,347	6,029	6,235	5,441
Donegal	4,849	4,805	4,523	4,410	4,607	3,936
Kildare	4,238	4,161	3,989	4,043	4,327	3,946
Limerick	4,753	4,597	4,276	4,083	4,223	3,667
Meath	4,071	3,989	3,803	3,773	4,015	3,604
Louth	3,415	3,346	3,280	3,343	3,629	3,300
Wexford	3,760	3,730	3,587	3,482	3,614	3,146
Tipperary	3,953	3,880	3,741	3,556	3,532	3,104
Kerry	4,096	3,951	3,702	3,425	3,587	3,106
Mayo	3,819	3,704	3,448	3,353	3,487	3,093
Waterford	2,983	2,927	2,829	2,794	2,931	2,612
Clare	3,005	3,016	2,844	2,756	2,888	2,587
Wicklow	2,710	2,699	2,628	2,507	2,646	2,301
Kilkenny	2,319	2,229	2,239	2,225	2,242	1,997
Westmeath	2,350	2,309	2,214	2,091	2,258	1,986
Laois	1,930	2,014	1,984	2,013	2,115	1,838
Offaly	2,083	1,993	1,864	1,845	1,899	1,742
Cavan	2,157	2,162	2,061	1,993	1,989	1,670
Roscommon	1,846	1,779	1,717	1,578	1,624	1,483
Monaghan	1,744	1,709	1,592	1,569	1,597	1,421
Carlow	1,582	1,528	1,489	1,402	1,494	1,341
Sligo	1,870	1,827	1,704	1,661	1,639	1,356
Longford	1,069	1,042	993	1,005	1,094	1,027
Leitrim	1,007	970	969	931	919	745
Other	1,603	1,247	961	950	964	890
Grand Total	105,308	103,375	98,796	96,093	100,944	89,096

\*For the current academic year the application process for 2021-22 is still open and the figures provided are as at the 5th September 2021.

### Grant Payments

799. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of students who qualified for a SUSI grant in each of the past five years and to date in 2021, by county. [41508/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The principal support provided by my Department in financial terms is the Student Grant Scheme. Under the terms of the Scheme, grant assistance is awarded to students attending an approved course in an approved institution who meet the prescribed conditions of funding, including those relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means.

The scheme is demand led and as such the numbers applying each year can change for reasons such as demographics, employment rates etc. The number of students who qualified for a SUSI grant in each of the past five years and to date in 2021, by county is as follows.

Home Address County	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22*
Dublin	15,478	15,416	15,316	14,803	15,906	13,829
Cork	8,881	8,722	8,325	7,853	8,159	6,707
Galway	5,334	5,228	5,068	4,773	4,794	3,958

Home Address County	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22*
Donegal	4,061	4,010	3,861	3,692	3,886	3,139
Kildare	3,318	3,247	3,220	3,157	3,321	2,926
Limerick	3,811	3,655	3,441	3,261	3,320	2,797
Meath	3,204	3,125	3,024	2,932	3,134	2,706
Louth	2,755	2,694	2,689	2,679	2,864	2,510
Wexford	3,137	3,130	3,051	2,880	2,966	2,512
Tipperary	3,177	3,112	3,082	2,869	2,850	2,413
Kerry	3,389	3,200	2,996	2,844	2,858	2,392
Mayo	3,147	3,049	2,869	2,790	2,842	2,412
Waterford	2,411	2,335	2,315	2,233	2,390	2,017
Clare	2,470	2,417	2,340	2,206	2,255	1,985
Wicklow	2,183	2,154	2,095	1,979	2,049	1,700
Kilkenny	1,871	1,802	1,863	1,804	1,797	1,531
Westmeath	1,893	1,888	1,795	1,700	1,796	1,515
Laois	1,571	1,609	1,610	1,595	1,644	1,397
Offaly	1,723	1,623	1,556	1,523	1,556	1,359
Cavan	1,780	1,732	1,690	1,612	1,565	1,269
Roscommon	1,510	1,447	1,462	1,308	1,339	1,139
Monaghan	1,435	1,386	1,327	1,296	1,302	1,112
Carlow	1,287	1,243	1,223	1,121	1,205	1,038
Sligo	1,491	1,434	1,360	1,322	1,279	996
Longford	865	834	825	822	902	810
Leitrim	843	798	809	781	751	595
Other	1,086	787	584	512	527	387
Grand Total	84,111	82,077	79,796	76,347	79,257	67,151

\*For the current academic year the application process for 2021-22 is still open and the figures provided are as at the 5th September 2021.

## Grant Payments

800. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if a specific grant will be made available to students who will commence studying for a doctorate in educational psychology in UCD in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41521/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The main support available to students is the statutory based Student Grant Scheme where students are studying for the first time or are progressing to study at a higher level. The decision on eligibility for a student grant is a matter, in the first instance, for the centralised student grant awarding authority SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) to determine.

Postgraduate students who meet the qualifying conditions for the special rate of grant under the Student Grant Scheme are eligible for the Postgraduate Special Rate of Maintenance grant, the income threshold for this grant is €24,500, also postgraduate students are eligible to have their post graduate tuition fees paid up to the maximum fee limit of €6,270.

Budget 2021 provided for enhanced postgraduate supports for the academic year 2021/22 including the fee grant amount rising from €2,000 to €3,500 and the income threshold for eligibility for these grants to increase from €31,500, now €54,240. This is an initial step in meeting part of the Government's commitments regarding SUSI grant support.

Students can determine their eligibility at [susi.ie/eligibility/income/](https://www.susi.ie/eligibility/income/).

In addition, tax relief at the standard rate of tax may be claimed in respect of tuition fees paid for approved courses at approved colleges of higher education, including approved undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Further information on this tax relief is available from a student's local Tax Office or from the Revenue Commissioners website, [www.revenue.ie](http://www.revenue.ie).

### **Grant Payments**

801. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his Department is willing to take action to assist students to access third-level education by disregarding the PUP payment as a reckonable income in their application for a SUSI grant, given the payment is due to come to an end on 7 September 2021; if he will commit to a review of those cases already rejected due to a payment which will no longer exist when the term starts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41558/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The Student Grant Scheme is a critical financial support for students participating in further and higher education. As in any statutory scheme, a core principle of the scheme is that there is consistency of approach and an equitable treatment for applicants as part of the means assessment process. All applications are assessed nationally with reference to the terms and conditions of the relevant student grant scheme. The terms and conditions of funding are applied impartially to all applicants.

The Social Welfare (Covid-19) (Amendment) Act 2020 establishes the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment as a social insurance benefit scheme separate from other social protection statutory schemes including the Supplementary Welfare Allowance and Jobseeker Allowance and Jobseeker Benefit schemes.

For student grant purposes the Covid-19 payment has been treated as reckonable income for the SUSI means assessment process since it was introduced in March 2020. This means that the Covid-19 payment is treated in a similar fashion to other Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection payments such as Jobseekers Benefit/Allowance, thus ensuring a consistency of approach and an equitable treatment of students and their families in the SUSI means assessment process.

However, a very important feature of the scheme that I would point to is the change of circumstances provision. If a student or party to their application experiences a change in circumstances that is not a temporary change and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, they can apply to SUSI to have their application assessed under the change in circumstances provision of the relevant Student Grant Scheme. The income of all parties to the application will be assessed or reassessed on current income and applicants may also be asked to provide evidence of same.

Such a change in circumstances would clearly include no longer being in receipt of a pandemic unemployment payment. Students will no longer receive the PUP from early September, in line with normal circumstances where students do not qualify for unemployment payments while at college.

An applicant can request a review by contacting the SUSI Support Desk at 0761 087 874 or emailing [support@susi.ie](mailto:support@susi.ie).

The change of circumstances provision is a well-established procedure and it can also op-

erate at scale. For example, over 10,000 applicants declared a change of circumstance in the 2020/21 academic year and some 40% of these applications related to COVID-19. I am confident that the application of this provision will continue to allow the scheme to be flexible and responsive to people's circumstances.

Any student who believes his/her student grant application has been assessed incorrectly may also avail of the opportunities to appeal to SUSI and subsequently to the independent Student Grants Appeals Board.

Apart from the Student Grant Scheme, students in third-level institutions experiencing exceptional financial need can apply for support under the Student Assistance Fund. This Fund assists students, in a sensitive and compassionate manner, who might otherwise be unable to continue their third level studies due to their financial circumstances. Details of this fund are available from the Access Office in the third level institution attended. This fund is administered on a confidential, discretionary basis.

### Grant Payments

802. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of students receiving supports in the form of grants each year since 2011, by undergraduate, postgraduate and post leaving certificate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41572/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The principal support provided by my Department in financial terms is the Student Grant Scheme. Under the terms of the Scheme, grant assistance is awarded to students attending an approved course in an approved institution who meet the prescribed conditions of funding, including those relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means.

The scheme is demand led and as such the numbers applying each year can change for reasons such as demographics, employment rates etc. The number of students receiving supports in the form of grants each year since 2012, the year SUSI was established, by undergraduate, postgraduate and post leaving certificate are as follows.

Graduate Type	2012-13*	2013-14*	2014-15*	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
PLC	8,251	9,338	9,367	9,071	9,023	8,477	7,786	7,407	6,703
Undergraduate	29,532	47,892	61,484	68,461	67,651	66,813	64,588	61,911	65,612
Postgraduate	2,630	2,792	2,475	2,346	2,159	2,208	2,214	2,079	2,525
Grand Total	40,413	60,022	73,326	79,878	78,833	77,498	74,588	71,397	74,840

Details for 2011/12 are below.

PLC	10,076
Undergraduate	54,789
Postgraduate	6,667
Grand Total	71,532

\* First 3 years of SUSI were new applications only.

### **Third Level Education**

803. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the percentage of international students of full-time higher education students in the public and private higher education sectors, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41573/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Officials in my Department are working with the Statistics Unit in the Higher Education Authority (HEA) to gather the data, and this will be sent to the Deputy once available.

It should be noted that this HEA does not gather data in respect of private colleges engaged in the provision of higher education.

### **Third Level Education**

804. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the percentage of mature entrants of the total number of entrants in full-time undergraduate higher education programmes since 2011; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41576/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Attached is a document outlining the percentage of mature entrants of the total number of entrants in full-time undergraduate higher education programmes since 2011.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq804-09-09-21\_en.docx">Undergraduate New Entrants</a>]

### **Further and Higher Education**

805. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of English language students in the State in each of the years since 2016; the number of English as a foreign language students in further education and training since 2011; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41585/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** In relation to English language education (ELE) in Ireland, it should be noted that this is a broad and diverse sector with the vast majority of activity undertaken by private sector providers. This sector offers a range of different programmes and offerings to both EU/EEA and non-EU/EEA learners who travel to the State to study English. My Department does not collect the data requested in respect of this sector.

As Irish society becomes increasingly diverse, developing English language skills is becoming increasingly vital in enabling non-English speaking migrants and their families to fully participate in all spheres of Irish life. While many migrants coming to Ireland are well educated and skilled, there is also a significant number of migrants with lower standards of education who require English Language tuition.

In the further education and training (FET) sector, all 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) offer free English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, as part of their Adult Literacy provision, to meet the day-to-day social, cultural and work-related language needs of

new community members. Priority is given to unemployed migrants, international protection applicants and refugees with limited or no English language skills.

ESOL Literacy classes are also provided to assist people with no formal education in their home country or who don't have basic literacy skills. These classes can be provided on either 1:1 or small group basis. All applicants are required to complete an initial assessment before starting class to ensure that all learners are provided with classes at the correct level.

Figures for 2020 indicated that planned beneficiaries for ESOL provision were 20,317. While figures did decline in 2020, no doubt as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, they remained relatively high at 16,274. Please see attached table which includes figures that are available in relation to ESOL reported numbers from 2013 to 2020.

### ESOL reported numbers by year

Year	ESOL reported numbers
2013	11055
2014	11055
2015	11708
2016	13096
2017	12755
2018	15397
2019	19408
2020	16274

Source: 2013 - 2017: Annual Statistical Returns Survey. Data captured at participant level.  
2018 - 2020: PLSS Reported Data Outturn. Data captured at beneficiary level

### Further and Higher Education

806. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if a list will be provided of all infrastructure projects in further or higher education to be delivered by way of public private partnership; the estimated cost of each project in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41586/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** There are currently 11 higher education projects in the pipeline for delivery by way of public private partnership. The projects are split between two bundles and are detailed in the following table:

Bundle	Higher Education Institute	Project Title
Bundle 1	TU of the Shannon: Midlands and Midwest Athlone Campus	STEM Building
Bundle 1	Munster TU Cork Campus	Learning Resource Centre
Bundle 1	Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art and Design	Digital Media Building
Bundle 1	TU Dublin Blanchardstown campus	Teaching Building: Phase 2 of Masterplan
Bundle 1	TU Dublin Tallaght campus	Culinary Arts, Hospitality & Tourism and Engineering
Bundle 1	Munster TU Tralee Campus	STEM Building
Bundle 2	Galway Mayo Institute of Technology	STEM Building
Bundle 2	IT Carlow	Science & Health Building
Bundle 2	TU of the Shannon: Midlands and Midwest Limerick Campus	Applied Science & IT Building
Bundle 2	Letterkenny Institute of Technology	Education Building
Bundle 2	Waterford Institute of Technology	Architecture/Engineering, Computing & Humanities Building

As these projects are currently in procurement, the estimated costs are commercially sensi-

tive.

### Departmental Staff

807. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the current policy regarding the employment of persons with disabilities in his Department and in each State and semi-State body under the aegis of his Department; the disability quota of his Department at present; if there is an active campaign to increase the disability workforce from the current target of 3% to a minimum of 6% by 2024; if this quota has now been exceeded; if so, the details of same; if there has been an advertised competition in relation to the quota; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41595/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Part V of the Disability Act 2005 requires that public bodies promote and support the employment of people with disabilities and ensure that 3% of staff employed by them are people with disabilities. The requirement applies to my department and the bodies under its aegis

The Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities for 2015 – 2024, commits the Government to progressively increasing the statutory target for the employment of people with disabilities from 3% to a minimum of 6% in the public sector by 2024.

In 2020, the reported percentage of employees with a disability under the definition of the Disability Act 2005 for my Department was 3.68%.

My department is mostly resourced through the Public Appointments Service (PAS). As the leading recruiter for the Civil and Public Service, PAS promotes and supports the recruitment of people with disabilities into the civil and public service. While the assistance of the Public Appointments Service is sought for the majority of recruitments in my Department, my Department is committed to supporting staff members with disabilities by providing reasonable accommodation where required.

### Further and Higher Education

808. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science further to Parliamentary Question No. 1243 of 27 July 2021, the number of places it is anticipated that will be added under each of the programmes (details supplied) of the 50,000 announced under the pathway to work policy document; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41626/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** The additional 50,000 education and training places referred to in Pathways to Work form part of the Government's response to the labour market and skills effects of the pandemic. A range of measures were introduced as a response to upskilling and reskilling needs of individuals and businesses through the July Jobs Stimulus and Budget 2021. These measures are providing for 35,000 education and training places to help those who were displaced by the effects of the pandemic. A further 15,000 places were announced as part of the skills package in Budget 2021.

In the further education and training sector, these measures are providing for 21,000 places on the Skills to Complete initiative, an additional 8,550 places through Skillnet Ireland sup-

ported programmes, 10,000 places allocated to the Apprenticeship Incentivisation scheme, the roll-out of 1,500 retrofit training places across the country, and an additional 1,600 places on the Skills to Advance initiative.

In the higher education sector, these measures are providing for an additional 3,500 Spring-board places, 2,500 places in modular programmes in higher education as well as 2,555 post-graduate places under the HCI Pillar 1.

### **Further and Higher Education**

809. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science further to Parliamentary Question No. 1245 of 27 July 2021, if SOLAS in consultation with further and higher education providers will consider removing the requirement to complete 12 weeks of on-the-job training following the completion of the phase six of an apprenticeship for the apprentices that have faced substantial delays due to waiting lists for off-the job training; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41627/21]

835. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the actions taken to address the delays with on-campus phases of apprentices given that the current delays are creating challenges for apprentices and employers. [42223/21]

836. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if an allowance will be made for older apprentices to be prioritised in the current backlog (details supplied); and his plans to address the specific needs of this group of apprentices. [42224/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 809, 835 and 836 together.

Craft apprenticeships account for 25 of the 62 existing available apprenticeship programmes. They comprise of a standard seven phase programme of alternating on-the-job and off-the-job phases. The off-the-job training for these programmes is delivered in Training Centres, Institutes of Technology and Technological Universities. Given the practical nature of off-the-job training for craft apprentices, the shutdown of on-site learning activity in 2020 and 2021 had a significant impact on the ability of craft apprentices to progress through their course.

In addition to the general activity surrounding a return to on-site learning across the further and higher education sector a number of specific actions were put in place to support craft apprentices to progress in their training in a timely manner:-

- Craft apprentices were prioritised for a return to on-site learning on 8 March 2021.
- Delivery of off-the-job phases continued over the summer, subject to public health advice and with restricted numbers. This approach assisted institutions and providers in preparing and organising the safe return of larger numbers in the autumn.
- €20m in capital funding has been provided to increase training capacity in the system with SOLAS and HEA allocating this to ETBs and HEIs. This will facilitate an additional 4,000 craft apprenticeship places, assisting significantly with the immediate backlog issues but also more broadly increase training capacity in the apprenticeship system as the sector caters for higher demand.

- An additional €12 million was allocated for 2021 to support additional classes and teaching capacity to ameliorate COVID-19 measures at higher education level (Phases 4 and 6).

- A three-step plan to tackle the backlog in craft apprenticeship off-the-job training over the coming period by SOLAS and further and higher education providers is well developed. Step 1 of the plan includes an increase in the number of training workshops available across further and higher education from September 2021 onwards. Steps 2 and 3 involve tailored emergency approaches to accelerate the throughput of apprentices at Phases 2 and 6 for a designated period of time.

- Phase 2 apprentice commence off-the-job training throughout the year. SOLAS are engaging with the ETBs to maximise and expand provision to clear the waiting lists for phase 2 training.

- Phase 4 and 6 intakes are currently scheduled three time per year – September, January and April. Additional capacity coming on stream at phase 4 and 6 from September has resulted with in the region of 2,500 phase 4 and 6 apprentices scheduled to commence off-the-job training in September, up from 2,100 per intake immediately pre-COVID.

- In the event that Phase 4 and 6 are prevented from returning at full capacity, a number of alternatives remain available to ensure that craft apprentices are not precluded from qualifying in a timely manner, including the potential for competency assessments to allow apprentices to qualify. Any such measure would need to safeguard the integrity of the Craft Certificate qualification.

The SOLAS apprenticeship scheduling management system aims to call apprentices for their off-the-job training on a longest waiting basis on the day of scheduling. There is no facility to prioritise apprentices based on age, or any other factor.

Further updates will be published over the coming weeks on [www.apprenticeship.ie](http://www.apprenticeship.ie).

### **Third Level Staff**

810. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science further to Parliamentary Question No. 360 of 24 June 2021, the overall percentage of academic and research staff in full-time permanent employment in public higher education institutes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41635/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Following Parliamentary Question (PQ) 34106/21, I undertook to revert with additional information.

The question posed requested the percentages of academic and research staff respectively in full-time permanent employment in higher education institutes and the data available to my Department in respect of the Institutes of Technology and Technological Universities were not in a format, whereby those percentages could be calculated.

My Department has since sought updated information from the Higher Education Authority. Based on the Quarter 1 2021 Employment Control Framework returns, the Authority has advised of the following:

Universities:

81.6% of academics are in full-time permanent employment and 5.5% of researchers are in

full-time permanent employment.

Institutes of Technology and Technological Universities:

83.6% of academics are in full-time permanent employment and 16.6% of researchers are in full-time permanent employment.

The definition/ categorisation of staff used for the purpose of reporting data takes place at HEI level.

In relation to the question of precarious employment, as I have highlighted before, there are a number of work streams which are relevant. I am engaging with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and with the HEA regarding a revised employment control framework. The Deputy will be aware that we have also established a subgroup of the national advisory forum for Ireland's framework for doctoral education which is considering the overall position as regards PhD students. My Department will continue to engage with the HEA regarding its analysis of the staff data to inform how this issue can be further addressed.

### **Nursing Education**

811. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if placements for nursing students from public higher education institutes are provided in private hospitals; the number of placements provided each year; the total provided by private hospitals; the number of placements in each hospital since 2011, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41636/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The data requested by the Deputy is not held by my Department nor the agencies under its remit.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are governed by the Universities Act 1997, the Institutes of Technologies Acts 1992 to 2006 and the Technological Universities Act 2018. Within the meaning of these Acts, HEIs are autonomous with regard to management of their academic affairs.

Placements are organised at the level of each individual HEI, as part of their programme offerings to be delivered in conjunction with relevant placement providers. Where appropriate, each HEI will develop their programme offerings to meet the accreditation standards of relevant regulatory and professional recognition bodies including where placements are a requirement.

Responsibility and oversight for student placements lies with the HEI awarding the degree and Regulatory Boards with responsibility for the professions in question. As such, neither the Minister nor this Department has any role in administering placements, and this matter should be raised with the bodies in question in the first instance.

In addition, it must be noted that the Higher Education Authority do not hold information on compulsory placements on Higher Education Courses, while the Student Record System does not keep a record of placements.

### **Apprenticeship Programmes**

812. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education,

Research, Innovation and Science if experience providing on-the-job training to apprentices qualifies towards teaching and training experience if a tradesperson wishes to pursue a career as an off-the-job instructor of apprentices; the qualification required for off-the-job instructor of apprentices; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41638/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Applicants for off-the-job training instructors in any of the 25 craft apprenticeships should possess a National Craft Certificate or equivalent, together with a minimum of three years relevant post qualification apprenticeship experience. As it is a competitive process, previous experience in training, instructing or teaching is also required.

Additional requirements vary depending on the needs of the individual training centres/institutions who may stipulate additional requirements in order to find the best suited candidate for the position.

### **Departmental Funding**

813. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the amount of funding received by private colleges, institutes of technology and universities under Springboard and Springboard+ in each year for which the data is available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41646/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The average cost of a Springboard+ course in 2020 was €926 per 10 ECTS. This was across all skills areas and NFQ levels. Please find attached the funding received by each provider from 2011 to 2020. The breakdown is provided by sector – university, IoT, private and other.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq813-09-09-21\_en.xlsx">springboard</a>]

### **Third Level Costs**

814. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science further to Parliamentary Question No. 1069 of 15 June 2021 and further correspondence in this regard of 22 July 2021 (details supplied), if the cost of an undergraduate medical student estimated to be between €25,000 and €30,000, represents the cost to the State or the cost to the institution; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41655/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Officials in my department have requested that the Higher Education Authority (HEA) confirm the position and the information available to the HEA will be communicated to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Third Level Reform**

815. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on whether reform to the HEA legislation should contain an explicit reference to the aim of restoring the Irish language as is currently present

within the 1971 Act; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41656/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The vision for the higher education system is that it provides high quality education which is innovative and adaptive to the needs of the learner, advances equality, diversity and inclusion, strengthens engagement with the wider education system and wider society, creates knowledge and maximises the contribution of higher education to social, economic and cultural development.

The reformed HEA legislation will provide a detailed and modernised framework to provide for the achievement of this vision and for the regulation and oversight of the performance of Higher Education Institutions including the safeguarding of the reputation of the Irish higher education system aligned with best international practice.

The core objectives of the HEA legislation have remained consistent throughout the development of the legislation and are as follows:

- Promote and support Higher Education Institutions in achieving excellence in teaching, learning and research in higher education,
- Promote and safeguard the interests of students,
- Advance equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education,
- Provide a comprehensive governance and accountability framework to safeguard Exchequer investment in the sector and ensure accountability by HEIs for that funding,
- Maximise the contributions of higher education to social, economic, cultural and environmental development and sustainability and
- Maintain and enhance the reputation of the higher education sector, including international reputation.

The overall aim being to provide a high quality, student focused system with appropriate oversight and accountability to underpin public confidence of stakeholders, students and the public.

Section 4 of the Higher Education Authority Act, 1971 provides that – in performing its functions, An tÚdarás shall have regard to the national aims of maximising the contribution of higher education to social and economic progress, restoring the Irish language and preserving the national culture and shall endeavour to promote the attainment of those aims.

This has been updated in the General Scheme of a Bill to reform the Higher Education Authority Act to the following Object –

An tÚdarás shall have regard to the following objects in undertaking its functions –

(b) to support higher education providers in contributing to social, economic, cultural and environmental development and sustainability through leadership, innovation and agility.

The reference to cultural development and sustainability is intended to include HEA support for higher education providers in contributing to Irish language development and sustainability.

There is also a provision in the legislation for the Minister to prepare a Strategy encompassing the provision in the State of higher education, including teaching, learning and research. This provision includes the requirement that the Minister shall have regard to any

relevant national policies in the preparation of this Strategy. This includes any national policies in place on the Irish language.

The legislation also provides that the HEA shall maintain a continuous review of the demand for higher education and shall make recommendations of the overall provision of student places within the higher education system. This review and recommendations will take account of social, economic and cultural requirements. The cultural requirements incorporate Irish language requirements.

The pre-legislative scrutiny process on the General Scheme is ongoing and I will consider any recommendations from this process, including in relation to the Irish language.

I am committed to the Irish language remaining as an integral part of our culture and our higher education system.

### **Third Level Education**

816. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the total funding successfully drawn down by each HEI as part of the 2014 – 2020 Horizon programme; the amount successfully drawn down each year by each HEI from 2014, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41689/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The attached table provides the total funding successfully drawn down by each Higher Education Institution (HEI) as part of the Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (Horizon 2020) and the amount successfully drawn down each year by each HEI from 2014, in tabular form.

These figures are accurate on the date of access from the European Commission's Horizon 2020 dashboard database, 1 September 2021.

The Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation are vital instruments for Ireland's international research and innovation collaboration. In Horizon 2020, Ireland has so far won €1.18 billion in funding, and Irish researchers and innovators have particularly excelled in Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions and the European Research Council. As the attached table shows, Ireland's HEIs have been active participants in Horizon 2020, with substantial funding being won across HEIs and regions in Ireland, and by both the Universities and Institutes of Technology.

Horizon Europe is the ninth iteration of the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation. It was officially launched on 02 February 2021. Running from 2021-2027, Horizon Europe is the most ambitious Research and Innovation programme in the world with a budget of €95.5 billion. Building on the achievements of Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe offers a broad range of opportunities for Irish researchers, innovators and Irish companies of all sizes in the pursuit of new discoveries, scientific and technological advancement and innovation.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq813-09-09-21\_en.docx">funding</a>]

### **Science Foundation Ireland**

817. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education,

Research, Innovation and Science the amount of SFI funding received by each EU NUTS 2 and 3 region in the state per year since 2011, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41690/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The information requested by the Deputy is contained in the attached table.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq817-09-09-21\_en.xlsx">investment</a>]

### Third Level Education

818. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the total number of PhD students enrolled in each HEI since 2008; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41691/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The data requested is contained in the attached spreadsheet.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq818-09-09-21\_en.xlsx">phd</a>]

### Third Level Education

819. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the total amount of research capital funding received by each HEI since 2011; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41692/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Funding for research in higher education institutions (HEI) is provided by a number of different sources. The main sources of funding come from three distinct areas: direct government funding, indirect government funding and other funding sources such as Irish industry, foreign industry and EU funding programmes.

The table below shows the amount of capital funding received by each HEI which underpins the research expenditure reported by each HEI. The data are taken from the Higher Education R&D Survey (HERD) which is undertaken every two years to monitor the level of research and development activities in the higher education sector. The Survey asks each HEI to indicate how much they spend on research activities and how those research activities are funded.

The latest HERD Survey, covering the academic year 2018-2019, is available at:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/00d67-higher-education-research-and-development-survey-2018-2019/>

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq819-09-09-21\_en.docx">funding</a>]

### Third Level Education

820. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research,

Innovation and Science if his attention has been drawn to the requirement for students studying social care in ITT to sign a declaration advising that they will not go between their place of paid work and their college work placement (details supplied); and his plan to ensure that these students who are reliant on income from their jobs will be compensated financially to allow them to meet this condition of studying social care. [41701/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I was not aware of this requirement for students in social care placements in ITT, as HEIs are autonomous and independent with regard to their administrative and academic affairs, including in relation the facilitation of placements. Arrangements for social care placements are all arranged at a local level within the broad parameters of a framework developed by the Irish Association of Social Care Educators (IASCE). The conditions under which a placement is undertaken are similarly a matter between the HEI, the placement provider and the student.

A funding package of €105m has been created to support the tertiary sector to safely reopen in September 2021. This includes €21 million which will be allocated to provide specific extra supports for students including an extra €10m for the Student Assistance Fund which provides financial supports to students experiencing financial difficulties while in college.

### **Apprenticeship Programmes**

821. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the off-the-job training capacity for each craft apprenticeship in 2019, in tabular form; the off-the-job training capacity for each craft apprenticeship in 2021 with Covid and without Covid restrictions in place in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41724/21]

822. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the average duration of each craft apprenticeship, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41725/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 821 and 822 together.

Craft apprenticeships account for 25 of the 62 existing available apprenticeship programmes. They comprise of a standard seven phase programme of alternating on-the-job and off-the-job phases. The off-the-job training for these programmes is delivered in Training Centres, Institutes of Technology and Technological Universities. The minimum duration of each craft apprenticeship is four years, or 208 weeks. Attachment 2 details each craft apprenticeship and the minimum duration required to meet the standard. The current average duration of each programme is being collated and will be forwarded to the Deputy once available.

Given the practical nature of off-the-job training for craft apprentices, the shutdown of on-site learning activity in 2020 and 2021 had a significant impact on the ability of craft apprentices to progress through their course.

In addition to the general activity surrounding a return to on-site learning across the further and higher education sector a number of specific actions were put in place to support craft apprentices to progress in their training in a timely manner:-

- Craft apprentices were prioritised for a return to on-site learning on 8 March 2021.

- Delivery of off-the-job phases continued over the summer, subject to public health advice and with restricted numbers. This approach assisted institutions and providers in preparing and organising the safe return of larger numbers in the autumn.

- €20m in capital funding has been provided to increase training capacity in the system with SOLAS and HEA allocating this to ETBs and HEIs. This will facilitate an additional 4,000 craft apprenticeship places across the system in the coming period and into the future.

- An additional €12 million was allocated for 2021 to support additional classes and teaching capacity to ameliorate COVID-19 measures at higher education level (Phases 4 and 6).

- A three-step plan to tackle the backlog in craft apprenticeship off-the-job training over the coming period by SOLAS and further and higher education providers is well developed. Step 1 of the plan includes an increase in the number of training workshops available across further and higher education from September 2021 onwards. Steps 2 and 3 involve tailored emergency approaches to accelerate the throughput of apprentices at Phases 2 and 6 for a designated period of time.

National annual capacity for the three off-the-job training phases has been impacted as a result of lockdowns and the closure of on-site training over the last number of months. The data attached in attachment 1 is based on the following assumptions:

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq821-822-09-09-21\_en.xlsx">table1</a>]

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq821-822a-09-09-21\_en.xlsx">table2</a>]

*Question No. 822 answered with Question No. 821.*

### **Further and Higher Education**

823. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the total public funding received by private colleges under vote 45 previously 26 and the National Training Fund in each year since 2011, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41726/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** There are a number of initiatives administered through competitive call processes by the HEA on behalf of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science funded through the National Training Fund where not for profit/private institutions are eligible to apply. These are Springboard+, which has been running on an annual basis since 2011, the Human Capital Initiative Pillar 1 which commenced in 2020 and the July Stimulus Modular and part and full time taught postgraduate places programme in 2020.

The tables and text attached, as provided by the HEA, outline the funding associated for the delivery of free and subsidised places under these initiatives in addition to Apprenticeship funding.

Separately my Department provides funding to institutions outside the remit of the HEA. Funding provided in the period 2011 to 2020 is outlined in the attached table.

### **Further and Higher Education**

824. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the anticipated number of first-year enrolments in general and psychiatric nursing at the Mayo campus in GMIT in the academic 2021/2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41727/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** My Department does not produce projections of higher education enrolment on a course by course level, and so the data requested by the Deputy is not available.

First year enrolment figures for Nursing in GMIT from 2014 to 2019 (the latest available) are available in the table below.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq824-09-09-21\_en.docx">nursing</a>]

### Further and Higher Education

825. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of dental student year enrolments in dentistry per institution since 2008, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41800/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The requested information is contained in the attached spreadsheet.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq825-09-09-21\_en.xlsx">dentalstudents</a>]

### Further and Higher Education

826. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the total number of Springboard+ courses approved for 2021 and 2022; the breakdown between universities, institutes of technology and private colleges for 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41801/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Springboard+ 2021/22 provides 11,575 places across 330 courses.

The breakdown between universities, institutes of technology and private colleges for 2021 is as follows:

Springboard+ 2020/21	Institute of Technology	Private & Other Providers	University (Incl. TU)	Grand Total
Places	4655	3120	3800	11575

Springboard+ 2020/21	Institute of Technology	Private & Other Providers	University (Incl. TU)	Grand Total
Courses	154	54	122	330

### Apprenticeship Programmes

827. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of apprenticeship registrations in the construction

sector in each of the years 2000 to 2020 and to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41817/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** The information in relation to the number of apprenticeship registrations in the construction sector from 2002 to 2020 and to date in 2021 are attached below along with a breakdown of registrations in each construction sector apprenticeship.

Information in relation to the number of registrations prior to 2002 is unavailable.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq827-09-09-21\_en.xlsx ">apprentice</a>]

### Third Level Fees

828. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of successful appeals made to SUSI in 2018, 2019 and 2020, in tabular form. [41828/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The number of successful appeals made to SUSI in 2018/19, 2019/20 & 2020/21 (as at August 2021), is outlined in the table below:

Appeal Result	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
Total Successful Appeals to SUSI	5,257	5,184	5,642

### Third Level Fees

829. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of successful appeals made to the student grants appeals board in 2018, 2019 and 2020, in tabular form. [41829/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The number of successful appeals made to Student Grant Appeals Board in 2018/19, 2019/20 & 2020/21 (06 September 2021), is outlined in the table below:

Appeal Result	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21 to date
Total Successful Appeals to SUSI	281	285	258

### Further and Higher Education

830. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science further to Parliamentary Question No. 2148 of 27 July 2021, if all specified nursing places are in public institutes of higher education; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41832/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** In recognition of the particular circumstances faced by students this year, my Department worked with the HEA and the Higher Education Institutions to identify where

additional places could be provided in the higher education system. As a result of this, together with the additional places created under the Human Capital Initiative, 4,650 places have been created across a wide range of courses which have helped ensure that more students than ever before could be offered a place on a higher education course.

While some places created under the HCI are in private third level institutions, all additional places created as a result of the engagement with HEA and HEIs are in publicly funded institutions. This includes all places created in nursing.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

831. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on a matter (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41883/21]

**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 last June and in keeping with the Government's objective of moving to a return to safe onsite provision in higher and further education over this period, extensive planning was 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.

On the basis of those plans and subject to the conditions of the notice published by my Department ([www.gov.ie/en/publication/3b8e5-notice-resumption-of-in-person-provision-for-the-english-language-education-sector/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3b8e5-notice-resumption-of-in-person-provision-for-the-english-language-education-sector/)), in-person activity could begin to resume from 19th July 2021 where it is safe to do so.

When resuming in-person activity, ELE providers are advised to be 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.

- 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 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.

In undertaking this limited resumption of activity, all existing restrictions and public health guidance with appropriate protective measures and limited congregation needs 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. Where there are concerns in relation to compliance with the requirements of the Government's 'Work Safely' protocol that cannot be resolved through the processes set out in the sectoral protocols, they may be brought to the attention of the Health & Safety Authority (HSA) utilising its complaints procedures - [www.hsa.ie/eng/customer\\_service/make\\_a\\_complaint/](http://www.hsa.ie/eng/customer_service/make_a_complaint/).

This initial resumption of in-person activity is a key stepping stone on the pathway to recovery for the ELE sector in Ireland. With the recent publication of COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting, which sets out Ireland's plan for the next and final phase of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and which will see the broader reopening of Irish society, my Department will have further engagements with the ELE sector as it develops plans for its own wider reopening, including for the resumption of the recruitment of new international students in line with public health guidelines, relevant travel restrictions and advices, and in accordance with the Government's published roadmap.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

832. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the measures he is taking to promote or facilitate remote working for staff in his Department or bodies under the aegis of his Department; the costs this has generated in terms of the provision of laptops, desktop computers or contributions to Wi-Fi costs or phone-related expenses; the number of staff who have applied for permission to work from home on a permanent or hybrid-model basis (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41954/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Staff of my department have been working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which had provided for home working to continue where possible. Following the Taoiseach's announcement on the 1st of September, my department is now in the process of planning for a phased return to the workplace

A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

Information relating to remote working arrangements for the aegis bodies of my department and associated costs, along with costs generated within my department for the provision of laptops, mobile phones and data costs are set out in the links provided.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq832-09-09-21\_en.xlsx">datacosts</a>]

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq832a-09-09-21\_en.xlsx">table</a>]

### **Third Level Fees**

833. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of SUSI grant recipients including a parent in receipt of a widows or widowers pension. [42038/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The main support to students attending higher education is the Student Grant Scheme. Under the Student Grant Scheme, eligible candidates may receive funding, provided they are attending an approved course at an approved institution and meet the prescribed

conditions of funding, including those which relate to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment (progression) and means.

The number of SUSI grant recipients whereby the applicant (or a party to the applicant) was in receipt of a widows or widowers pension is as follows for the 2020/21 academic year.

2020/21	Dependent Applicants including a parent in receipt of widow/widower's pension	2340
2020/21	Independent applicants where applicant declared widow or widower's pension	41

### Third Level Fees

834. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if consideration will be given to omitting income from widow and widowers pensions from the reckonable income for SUSI grants. [42040/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The Student Grant Scheme, administered by SUSI, provides grant assistance to students who meet the prescribed conditions of funding, including those relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means.

Widows'/Widower's pension is included as reckonable income for the purposes of the student grant means test. Widow's/Widower's pension is also a qualifying payment for the special rate of grant where the reckonable income is less than €24,500. Where the pension includes a CDA (child dependent allowance) the CDA element may be deducted from the payment for the purposes of qualifying for the special rate of grant and determining total reckonable income.

As the Deputy is aware, the scheme is under review and all proposals made in relation to education expenditure, including student grants for the 2022/23 academic year, will be considered in the context of Budget 2022.

*Question No. 835 answered with Question No. 809.*

*Question No. 836 answered with Question No. 809.*

### Third Level Education

837. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will respond to concerns raised by a person (details supplied) in relation to the long-awaited reopening of third-level education; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42242/21]

846. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will provide a list of third-level institutions that will be resuming classes this term with the majority of their students still learning remotely; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42676/21]

848. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if it will be made clear to students the way the return to third-level education will be undertaken under the current restrictions; if clarity will be given to students on whether they will return to campus or will continue to conduct their education primarily online in view of the fact students are becoming increasingly frustrated with the lack of clear communication from third-level institutions and from his Department; and if he will

make a statement on the matter. [42678/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 837, 846 and 848 together.

The Safe Return Plan for further and higher education, which was agreed following extensive discussions between sectoral representatives, institutions, public health, students, staff and other stakeholders was published on the 15th June.

The Plan provided a comprehensive framework for institutions to proceed with planning to safely return to significant on-campus learning, teaching, research and a broader student experience fully supported by public health authorities through the implementation of a comprehensive and extensive suite of precautionary measures.

The Plan fully recognises the autonomy and diversity of the higher and further education sector, and recognises that institutions will develop and implement their own plans for returning on-site, in line with their local context and physical infrastructure. Local engagement with staff and student representatives is central on these plans and clear and consistent communication to learners and staff is a fundamental principle underlying the sectoral approach.

All higher education institutions have confirmed the return to on-site small group learning for 2021. The majority of institutions have made plans for large-scale on site learning in 2021. Large lecture theatres, in particular, will be actively managed, either through applying percentage occupancy limits, setting a maximum class size, an upper limit on lecture length/ period of continuous occupancy or otherwise, depending on local context and risk assessment. These variations are in line with the autonomy given to the HEIs in the Plan to make decisions on the return to campus in line with their own infrastructure and institutional contexts.

The sector has now commenced to move from planning into the implementation phase with the realisation on the 6th September, of the commencement of the return of this sector to significant on-site teaching, learning and research in a number of centres including 6 higher education campuses.

### **Further and Higher Education**

838. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will make formal enquiries to Solas regarding the delay in making the education and training fund agreed available to workers (details supplied); and the way they can accelerate the progress given the drawn out struggle which has resulted in these workers not receiving same after years of dutiful employment. [42293/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** In recognition of the exceptional circumstances of this case, as reflected in Kevin Foley's report, the Government was willing to allocate a fund of €3 million, to be administered by SOLAS, to support career guidance, training, education, and pre-retirement planning etc. for the former Debenhams workers. The €3m fund was put to the former Debenhams members for ballot, which was passed on 20th May 2021.

My officials, and SOLAS, are aware of the necessity to finalise the arrangements as quickly as possible.

The current position is that SOLAS are engaging with the liquidators on the identification of the former Debenhams workers who will be invited to apply for support from the Fund.

SOLAS has also finalised a paper on the activities proposed for support from the Fund, and the levels of such support. SOLAS is engaging continuously with former Debenhams workers and their representatives regarding arrangements.

In addition to this, my Department is engaging with officials in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on the financing of the Fund, and the associated staffing requirements. Arrangements are also being made to establish the advisory committee as referenced in Report of the Chairman of the Labour Court.

There are so many upskilling and reskilling opportunities within further education and training (FET) and beyond, and SOLAS will work with the former workers individually to find the right option, and right support, which will meet their needs.

### **Language Schools**

839. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science when English language schools will be permitted to enrol international students; the reason English language schools are being treated differently to university English language programmes in respect of international enrolment and student visas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42353/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** On 29 April 2021, the Government made a commitment to a significant increase in on-site further education and training, higher education and research from the beginning of this academic year. Higher and further education and training, and research are considered to be essential activities and extensive planning has been undertaken to enable the academic term 2021/22 to take place mainly on-site for all students, learners, and staff.

As part of this planning, the Department has worked closely with the higher education sector and student representative bodies to develop a protocol with key principles of assurance to ensure that the arrival of international higher education students for the coming academic year is managed safely and in line with public health requirements. This protocol includes all up-to-date public health measures and, in addition, details other arrangements such as familiarisation training for all these students in advance of their arrival. The protocol includes assurances from the Higher Education sector that students who arrive will be transported from the airport directly to suitable accommodation to allow them to adhere to the prevailing public health requirements regarding self-quarantine.

My Department has also been working closely with English language education (ELE) stakeholders over the course of the pandemic to date via the Covid-19 Working Group established for this sector. Following the publication of COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery: The Path Ahead last June, extensive planning was undertaken by sectoral stakeholders within this Working Group to enable the safe resumption of limited, small group, in-person provision to cater for the needs of this sector's existing cohort of students i.e. those currently in the State. On the basis of these plans and subject to the conditions of the notice published by my Department (<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3b8e5-notice-resumption-of-in-person-provision-for-the-english-language-education-sector/>), limited, in-person activity could begin to resume within this sector from 19th July 2021 where it is safe to do so. This initial resumption of in-person activity is a key stepping stone on the pathway to recovery for the ELE sector in Ireland.

With the recent publication of COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting, which sets out Ireland's plan for the next and final phase of the re-

sponse to the COVID-19 pandemic and which will see the broader reopening of Irish society, my Department is having further engagements with the ELE sector. An update will be provided to the sector shortly.

### **Direct Provision System**

840. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the breakdown of the estimated €10 million (details supplied) current spending related to implementing the new direct provision system; the number of budgetary cycles the spending will be take place over; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42432/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** In relation to English Language Provision Phase 1, the €8.5m costing was based on projected numbers as set out on the White Paper for the provision of intensive English Language supports being available to participants for a 6 month period. The cost of these intensive supports are based on costs of the Refugee Resettlement programme, which offers up to 20 hours English language provision per week in the first year of settlement. In relation to the English Language Provision Phase 2, the €1.5m refers to the cost of expanding the relevant programmes provided through the further education system to accommodate the projected numbers participating for a further 12 months.

In relation to the Student Support scheme anticipated spending, this costing of €300,000 was based on anticipated expenditure for the 2021 scheme in academic year 2021/22. The actual expenditure for the 2020 scheme (academic year 2020/21) was €253,038. The funding provided to each successful applicant consists of maintenance and fees with qualification criteria similar to the statutory based Student Grant Scheme (SUSI).

### **Further and Higher Education**

841. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will allow a late appeal for a person (details supplied). [42581/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The decision on eligibility for student grant assistance is a matter, in the first instance, for the centralised student grant awarding authority SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) to determine.

If an individual applicant considers that she/he has been unjustly refused a student grant, or that the rate of grant awarded is not the correct one, she/he may appeal, in the first instance, to SUSI. Where an individual applicant has had an appeal turned down in writing by SUSI and remains of the view that the scheme has not been interpreted correctly in his/her case, an appeal may be submitted to the independent Student Grants Appeals Board within the required timeframe. Such appeals can be made by the appellant on line via [www.studentgrantappeals.ie](http://www.studentgrantappeals.ie).

Under Section 21(2) of the Student Support Act 2011 an applicant has 30 days, from the date of the Appeals Officer's decision in the awarding authority, to submit their appeal to the Student Grant Appeals Board (Board).

Under Section 21(3) of the Act the Board may extend this period by a further 30 days if it is satisfied that the applicant has given reasonable cause to do so.

The Board does not have any discretion to extend the time period beyond that allowed for in the Act.

My officials advised that the student in question has engaged in the SUSI appeals process but did not submit his appeal to the Student Grant Appeals Board within the required time-frame. Therefore the rate of grant awarded to the student remains the same.

Apart from the Student Grant Scheme, students in third-level institutions experiencing exceptional financial need can apply for support under the Student Assistance Fund. This Fund assists students, in a sensitive and compassionate manner, who might otherwise be unable to continue their third level studies due to their financial circumstances. Details of this fund are available from the Access Office in the third level institution attended. This fund is administered on a confidential, discretionary basis.

### **Apprenticeship Programmes**

842. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the gender breakdown in construction-related apprenticeships over the past three years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42619/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** A number of reports have highlighted that the number of women employed in craft apprenticeships is low, reflecting the traditionally low levels of women represented across the craft sectors. There is a specific focus on female participation as part of the Generation Apprenticeship national promotional campaign. In addition, SOLAS offer a bursary of €2,666 to eligible employers who employ women apprentices in one of the craft apprenticeships, however participation by women continues to lag behind other apprenticeships.

The Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025 provides for an expansion of measures targeted to ensuring that the profile of the apprenticeship population more closely reflects that of society in general. To this end, the structure of the new apprenticeship system will include an equity of access committee which will advise on sectoral interventions to support widening of participation in apprenticeship.

Information in relation to the gender breakdown of the population in construction-related apprenticeships over the past three year can be found in attachment 1.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq842-09-09-21\_en.xlsx">genderbreakdown</a>]

### **Apprenticeship Programmes**

843. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of top-up bursaries for employing female apprenticeships that have been paid to employers in the construction sector; the breakdown by type of apprenticeship; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42620/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** Construction related apprentices are registered to the following craft apprenticeships: Brick and Stonelaying, Carpentry and Joinery, Painting and Decorating, Plastering, Plumbing, Stonecutting and Stonemasonry and Wood Manufactur-

ing and Finishing. As of the end of June 2021 22 of the 5,048 construction apprentices were women. In addition 88 of the 7,583 electrical apprentices were women.

Bursaries for employing craft apprentices who are women are available across the 25 craft apprenticeship programmes. The information requested by the Deputy in relation to bursaries paid to employers in the construction sector is being compiled by SOLAS. An answer will be forwarded to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Apprenticeship Programmes**

844. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if the requirement to hire construction apprentices has been included in any of the State’s large construction procurement contracts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42621/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** Details of public sector procurement contracts are not held by my Department. The Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025 which was published in April 2021 contains a provision that the Strategic Procurement Advisory Group, chaired by the Office of Government Procurement, will consider the potential for measures supporting apprenticeship through public sector procurement and deliver guidance on the inclusion of an apprenticeship provision within public sector tendering processes.

The Strategic Procurement Advisory Group is an advisory forum consisting of the Office of Government Procurement (OGP), government departments, and public procurement practitioners from across government. The Apprentice Working Group of the Strategic Procurement Advisory Group is being formed to achieve the key deliverable as outlined above, within the Action Plan for Apprenticeship. Terms of Reference for this working group are currently being finalised with the group due to report by year end.

### **Apprenticeship Programmes**

845. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the current progress on plans for a barbering apprenticeship scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42637/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** Apprenticeship is a demand driven educational and training programme which aims to develop the skills of an apprentice in order to meet the needs of industry and the labour market.

The development of a new apprenticeship is employer-led, with consortia comprising employer groups and educational providers coming together to identify a skills need and appropriate apprenticeship response in their sector.

The Apprenticeship Council examine any proposals arising in the context of identified skills needs. All apprenticeship proposals go through a rigorous evaluation process which is led by the Council, and approval is subject to the application meeting a prescribed set of requirements as set out in the handbook and guidance document on Developing a National Apprenticeship which may be accessed on [www.apprenticeship.ie](http://www.apprenticeship.ie).

I understand from SOLAS that an expression of interest in developing an apprenticeship

in barbering has already been received and they are engaging with the proposer in the matter. However, a formal proposal has not been received by the Apprenticeship Council to date.

*Question No. 846 answered with Question No. 837.*

### **Third Level Education**

847. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he has directed third-level institutes to resume in person teaching; if students who have no choice from their college but to continue remote learning will receive a full or partial rebate on their college fees given they are not receiving the same experience as their counterparts in other colleges who will be returning to in person learning; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42677/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The Safe Return Plan, which was agreed following extensive discussions between sectoral representatives, institutions, public health, students, staff and other stakeholders and was published on the 15th June, is predicated on the sector's full commitment to a significant increase in on-site teaching and learning activities and research.

The Plan provided a comprehensive framework for institutions to proceed with planning to safely return to significant on-campus learning, teaching, research and a broader student experience fully supported by public health authorities through the implementation of a comprehensive and extensive suite of precautionary measures.

The Plan fully recognises the autonomy and diversity of the higher and further education sector through the institutions developing and implementing their own plans for returning on-site. The way in which each institution implements the plan will differ, in line with their own local context and physical infrastructure. Local engagement with staff and student representatives is central on these plans and clear and consistent communication to learners and staff is a fundamental principle underlying the sectoral approach.

All HEIs have confirmed the return to on-site small group learning for 2021. The majority of HEIs have made plans for large-scale learning in 2021/22. Large lecture theatres, in particular, will be actively managed, either through applying percentage occupancy limits, setting a maximum class size, an upper limit on lecture length/ period of continuous occupancy or otherwise, depending on local context and risk assessment. These variations are in line with the autonomy given to the HEIs in the Plan to make decisions on the return to campus in line with their own infrastructure and institutional contexts.

Higher Education Institutions are autonomous bodies and are responsible for their own day-to-day operations, management and administration. Any determination as to the level of fees to be charged is a matter for them in light of their own particular conditions and circumstances. It is important to note that the State currently provides very substantial financial support to undergraduate students in higher education towards the tuition fee cost of their studies. This commitment is demonstrated through the Free Fees Schemes under which the Exchequer currently contributes €357m to meeting the tuition fee costs of eligible undergraduate students in higher education. In addition, the Exchequer pays the student contribution of €3,000 per annum in full or part, through SUSI, for approximately 45% of free fee eligible students.

*Question No. 848 answered with Question No. 837.*

## Flexible Work Practices

849. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the steps being taken to facilitate remote working within his Department in particular to encourage remote working for those who live in the regions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42708/21]

850. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the way in which his Department and public bodies and agencies under his remit are accommodating requests for persons to work from home. [42758/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 849 and 850 together.

Staff of my department have been working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which had provided for home working to continue where possible. This was also the position adopted by aegis bodies of my department. Following the Taoiseach's announcement on the 1st of September, my department is now in the process of planning for a phased return to the workplace.

A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

*Question No. 850 answered with Question No. 849.*

## Special Educational Needs

851. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the supports in place for a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42817/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** In order to be eligible for a grant under the Student Grant Scheme 2021, a student must be progressing i.e. she must be moving from year to year within a course, having successfully completed the previous year or be transferring from one course to another where the award for the subsequent course is of a higher level than the previous course (Article 17 (3) (b) of the Student Grant Scheme 2021 refers. A student is ineligible if they already hold a higher education and training award at or above Level 6 of the framework of qualifications, or equivalent.

The Student Assistance fund provides financial support to full- or part-time students who are experiencing financial difficulties while attending higher education. The Student Assistance Fund can be claimed for expenses such as books, rent, food, medical costs, class materials, light and heat bills, essential travel and childcare.

Students on full- or part-time courses leading to a higher education award (National Framework of Qualifications level 6-10) in Irish universities, institutes of technology and other approved colleges are eligible to apply for the Student Assistance Fund.

### Third Level Fees

852. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of students in Ireland applying for the SUSI grant scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42888/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The principal support provided by my Department in financial terms is the Student Grant Scheme. Under the terms of the Scheme, grant assistance is awarded to students attending an approved course in an approved institution who meet the prescribed conditions of funding, including those relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means.

The scheme is demand led and as such the numbers applying each year can change for reasons such as demographics, employment rates etc. For the current academic year the application process for 2021-22 is still open. However, I can confirm that the number of students in Ireland with an Irish Home address who have applied to SUSI for 2021/22 as of 03/09/2021 is as follows.

Total number of applications received to 03/09/2021	89,096
Number of applications with an Irish Home address within the state( Republic Of Ireland)	88,220
Number of applications with an Irish Home address within Northern Ireland	115

### Student Accommodation

853. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of students in Ireland in student accommodation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42889/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The information requested by the Deputy is not held by my Department. My Department's main source of statistics on students is the Student Records System administered by the HEA, which does not record whether students are residing in student accommodation.

### Third Level Fees

854. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the status of the SUSI grant scheme review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42890/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The Deputy will be aware that the Programme for Government contains commitments to, among other things, review SUSI eligibility criteria, adjacency rates and post-graduate grant supports. On foot of these commitments I gave approval to commence a review of the Student Grant Scheme.

My Department is overseeing the implementation of the review. A Steering Committee has been established to provide direction for the external consultants undertaking the review. Its membership includes: the Union of Students of Ireland; Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI), SOLAS, the HEA; Irish University Association (IUA); Technological Higher Education Association (THEA); Technological University Dublin (TUD), the Department of Social Protection and officials from my Department.

A public consultation process closed in April with over 280 submissions received. The views of students were sought via an online survey process in May and over 9,000 survey responses were received. The consultants appointed to conduct the review, are carrying out their analysis of the data captured in the surveys. It is anticipated that the review will be completed later this year and will inform future priorities regarding the development of student grant policy, including in the context of forthcoming Estimates process for 2022.

### **Third Level Fees**

855. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his attention has been drawn to the financial impact and stress that the later payment dates of SUSI for 2021 will have on students; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42913/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The SUSI payment schedule is updated each year in line with college start dates, as to receive payment, a student must be registered with their college and the college must confirm their registration with SUSI.

SUSI consulted with colleges and found that for academic year 2021-22, many colleges will open from mid to end September. Following careful consideration, the first scheduled maintenance grant payment for higher education students is 8th October to allow students to register with their college and for colleges to then confirm their registration with SUSI.

To ensure students receive their first payment as soon as possible, SUSI will be making weekly payments from 8th October.

The maintenance grant is paid in nine instalments and in line with previous years, there are four scheduled payments before the end of December. In academic year 2020/21 the first payment was made on 9th October 2020.

### **Third Level Fees**

856. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the status of the SUSI review. [42914/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The Deputy will be aware that the Programme for Government contains commitments to, among other things, review SUSI eligibility criteria, adjacency rates and post-graduate grant supports. On foot of these commitments I gave approval to commence a review of the Student Grant Scheme.

My Department is overseeing the implementation of the review. A Steering Committee has been established to provide direction for the external consultants undertaking the review. Its membership includes: the Union of Students of Ireland; Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI), SOLAS, the HEA; Irish University Association (IUA); Technological Higher Education Association (THEA); Technological University Dublin (TUD), the Department of Social Protection and officials from my Department.

A public consultation process closed in April with over 280 submissions received. The views of students were sought via an online survey process in May and over 9,000 survey responses were received. The consultants appointed to conduct the review, are carrying out their analysis

of the data captured in the surveys. It is anticipated that the review will be completed later this year and will inform future priorities regarding the development of student grant policy, including in the context of forthcoming Estimates process for 2022.

### Government Communications

857. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his ministerial phones have been hacked or attempted to be hacked during the term of office. [42926/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The Department uses industry standard mobile device management software to manage corporate mobile phones. There are no records indicating that my Ministerial mobile phone nor the Ministerial mobile phone of my colleague Niall Collins TD was hacked.

### Government Communications

858. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he has ever used his personal phones for Government business; and if so, if the personal phones have been hacked during his term of office. [42944/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I can confirm that I do not use a personal phone for government business.

I am not aware of any hacking of the devices I use.

### Freedom of Information

859. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of freedom of information requests responded to by his Department in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; the number of responses that included documents related to text messages and other phone message communications such as messages sent through an application (details supplied), in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42966/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science was established on 02 August 2020. The following table outlines FOI requests received and processed since establishment:

Year	Total Responded
2021 ytd	43
2020 (DFHERIS est 08/2020)	27

My Department reports annually to both the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the Office of the Information Commissioner on Freedom of Information activity. The Office of the Information Commissioner publish this data in its annual report and the annual report for 2020 contains statistical information on DFHERIS.

As to the number of responses that include documents related to phone message communi-

cations, the eFOI system in operation in my Department does not allow for the bulk examination of records released under the FOI Act.

My Department routinely publishes FOI Disclosure Logs containing summary information on non-personal FOI requests processed and these logs can be accessed via our website.

### **Apprenticeship Programmes**

860. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the steps he is taking to address the difficulty prospective trade apprentices experience in finding an apprenticeship employer in view of the skills shortage in construction; if a system to match prospective trade apprentices with apprenticeship employers exists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42978/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** The Apprenticeship Jobs Portal ([www.apprenticeshipjobs.ie](http://www.apprenticeshipjobs.ie)) was launched in April 2019 to enhance the visibility and accessibility of apprentice job vacancies, and to assist small companies to advertise apprentice vacancies to a wide audience. Although not a matching system the platform is building traction month-on-month, with over 1,200 employers now registered on the site and over 250 job vacancies posted since its launch. Work is continuing to bring all apprentice employers on-board the system.

Under the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2012-2025, all apprentice vacancies will be advertised on or linked from the site by the end of 2021. Additional financial and non-financial supports including sector or programme specific recruitment supports for employers and in particular SMEs, will be rolled out during the lifetime of the plan to increase employer engagement and visibility of apprenticeship to applicants. Further enhancements will be considered by the new National Apprenticeship Office over the lifetime of the plan.

Learners of all ages can currently access information and link through to relevant study and education options from [www.gov.ie/therightcourse](http://www.gov.ie/therightcourse). Work has also commenced towards simplifying student application procedures across the tertiary education sector (further and higher education) with initial engagement underway between this Department, the CAO and SOLAS on how application processes could be presented to learners in an easily accessible manner.

### **Commissions of Investigation**

861. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the cost of each commission of investigation under the remit of his Department over the preceding decade. [42993/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Under the Commissions of Investigations Act 2004, in the preceding decade, there have been no commissions of investigation that come under the remit of my Department.

### **Further and Higher Education**

862. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science when the next higher education research and development survey will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43025/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The Higher Education Research and Development (HERD) survey is undertaken every two years among Ireland’s publicly-funded higher education institutions. The last iteration, covering the 2018-2019 academic year, was conducted by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

Following a Government decision to transfer certain research and innovation functions, the HERD Survey is the responsibility of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science from 2021 onwards.

The next survey, covering the 2020-2021 academic year, will be undertaken in 2022 and its publication is expected in Q4 2022.

### **Further and Higher Education**

863. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science when the next higher education system performance framework will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43026/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Since the publication of the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, the strategic policy context for the System Performance Framework has continued to evolve, including recent significant changes in the higher education landscape. The publication of the Statement of Strategy by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science earlier this year sets out the priorities of the new department for the period 2021-2023 and includes a commitment to deliver a revised system performance framework for Higher Education, which reflects national goals and priorities.

Work is underway to progress this, with a view to having a new system performance framework in place in advance of the academic year 2022-2023.

### **Further and Higher Education**

864. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science when the successor strategy to Innovation 2020 will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43027/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The development of a new national strategy for research and innovation (R&I) is a key commitment in the Government’s Economic Recovery Plan 2021, which sets out the “dual ambition of placing research, development and innovation at the heart of addressing Ireland’s economic and societal challenges, and building capacity and capability across the research and innovation system to move R&I up the value chain.”

The strategy will be a whole-of-Government strategy, as was the case for Innovation 2020, with my Department leading the development of the strategy.

A public consultation on the strategy was held in June & July earlier this year. In total, we received over 110 submissions in the public consultation from a range of stakeholders. In late June, the Department held an online stakeholder event where a wide range of stakeholders from across Ireland’s R&I system came together to discuss the issues raised in the consultation paper and inform the strategy. A number of further meetings with key stakeholders have begun and

will continue to run into autumn of this year.

Development is ongoing, but it is the intention that the next strategy will set a vision and ambition for Ireland's R&I system that all relevant actors will identify with and contribute to, with ambitious national strategic goals and objectives out to 2027. Successive action-led Work Programmes will map out specific deliverables over shorter timescales. This will enable agility and responsiveness over the full period of the strategy and a strong focus on delivery and reform.

I intend on bringing the strategy to Government for approval and subsequent publication later this year.

### **Ministerial Appointments**

865. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of formal and informal roles held by a person (details supplied) in the name of his Department or associated agency in the lifetime of this Government; when they were appointed to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43038/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I can confirm that the person referenced has not held any formal or informal roles in my Department or in its agencies during the lifetime of this Government.

### **Government Communications**

866. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he and or his special advisers and-or officials use or have used services (details supplied) to communicate in the past 18 months. [43073/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Neither I nor my advisors or senior management team use the services referenced by the Deputy. The use of these services is not authorised for official business on devices provided by my department.

### **Land Issues**

867. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Justice the body that regulates the boundary regulations regarding privately owned homes (details supplied). [43032/21]

870. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Justice if there is an avenue to pursue for a private home owner whose neighbour's trees are growing out of control in circumstances in which the neighbours refuse to maintain the trees; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41482/21]

891. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Justice if she will introduce legislation to regulate the height of boundary hedges and trees growing on boundaries between private gardens and adjoining properties. [41922/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 867, 870 and 891 together.

As the Deputy may be aware, the difficulties experienced by property owners arising from trees and high hedges on neighbouring land were raised in both the Dáil and the Seanad during the passage of the Land and Conveyancing Law Reform Act 2009.

My Department consulted on the matter with the Law Reform Commission, which had been involved in drafting the 2009 Act. The Commission took the view that unreasonable interference caused by high trees or hedges was a matter in any particular case for tort law or more generally for planning or environmental law.

Under our existing law, a person may be in a position to seek damages or an injunction requiring the cutting of boundary hedges or trees under the tort of nuisance. In order for the nuisance to be actionable, the person concerned would have to show that an easement existed, i.e., whether an easement of light or otherwise, and that there had been a substantial interference with that right.

Mediation on such issues should be considered in the first instance. While the Mediation Act 2017 does not deal directly with the issue of overhanging trees, it does seek to promote mediation as a viable, effective and efficient alternative to court proceedings. This Act contributes to the resolution of disputes by means of mediation, thereby reducing legal costs associated with such disputes and avoiding the stress involved in adversarial court proceedings.

### **Drug Dealing**

868. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Justice the monetary value of crack cocaine seized by An Garda Síochána in the R District in 2021. [41462/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I am informed by the Garda authorities that there have been a total of 258 drug-related incidents recorded on the Garda PULSE system in the R District in 2021, as of 01:30 on 19 August 2021. This District comprises of Coolock, Malahide and Swords Garda Stations.

I am further informed that information on the types of drugs and associated weights/volume and purity are only available following an analysis by Forensic Science Ireland (FSI) and therefore it is not yet possible, on the basis of data recorded on the Garda PULSE system, to determine the monetary value of crack cocaine seized in R District in 2021.

### **Traffic Management**

869. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice if she will provide more funding to An Garda Síochána to conduct traffic management; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41470/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and administration of the Garda organisation under the Garda Síochána Act 2005. This includes decisions on the deployment of members of An Garda Síochána throughout the State. Furthermore, under the Section 43(1) of the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Garda Commissioner is the Accounting Officer of An Garda Síochána and is responsible the administration of the Garda budget. As Minister, I have no role in these independent functions.

I am assured, however, that Garda management keeps this distribution of resources under continual review in the context of policing priorities and crime trends, to ensure their optimum

use. I am further advised that it is a matter for the Divisional Chief Superintendent to determine the optimum distribution of duties among the personnel available to him or her, having regard to the profile of each area within the Division and its specific needs.

Government investment into An Garda Síochána has reached unprecedented levels with Budget 2021 providing for €1.952 billion. This level of funding is enabling sustained, ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff. As a result, Garda numbers are now approximately 14,500 Garda members and over 3,000 Garda staff nationwide.

This investment in personnel is complemented by substantial investment in resources across the board for An Garda Síochána. The Deputy will be aware of the significant capital investment is being made in An Garda Síochána, including a total of €46 million for the Garda fleet between 2016 and 2021. This will ensure that An Garda Síochána has a modern, effective and fit-for-purpose fleet.

I can inform the Deputy that as at 31 July 2021, the latest date for which figures are available, there were 732 Garda members assigned to Roads Policing Duty nationwide. This represents an increase of over 17% since 2017.

Extensive information is available on my Department's website in relation to the numbers of Garda members and their assignment nationwide, including by rank and station, at the following link: [http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/An\\_Garda\\_Siochana\\_facts\\_and\\_figures](http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/An_Garda_Siochana_facts_and_figures).

This information is updated every month with the latest data provided by An Garda Síochána.

In relation to the Garda fleet, there were 3,228 vehicles assigned to the Garda fleet at 31 August 2021, which represents an increase of over 15% since 31 December 2019.

*Question No. 870 answered with Question No. 867.*

### **Crime Prevention**

871. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if she has established a working group in respect of the use of cryptocurrencies by organised crime entities and or gangs to conceal wealth gained from criminality; and if she has had any engagements with An Garda Síochána in respect of same. [41551/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I can inform the Deputy that the regulation of virtual assets and cryptocurrencies are matters appropriate to my colleague the Minister for Finance.

I am informed by An Garda Síochána that personnel attached to the Garda National Cyber Crime Bureau have received specialist training in the analysis and tracing of cryptocurrencies transactions. The Bureau continues to enhance capabilities in the area of blockchain analysis to assist cybercrime investigations. An Garda Síochána also liaise closely with their law enforcement partners, including Europol and Interpol, in respect of cryptocurrency-related investigations.

### **Residency Permits**

872. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the current and or expected

residency status in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41554/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** The application for a certificate of naturalisation in respect of the person referred to by the Deputy has recently been approved.

This has been communicated to the applicant and upon receipt of the prescribed fee and requested documentation the case will be further processed. Subject to all documents being in order, a certificate of naturalisation will then issue.

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.

### **Departmental Staff**

873. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Justice the current policy regarding the employment of persons with disabilities in her Department and in each State and semi-State body under the aegis of her Department; the disability quota of her Department at present; if there is an active campaign to increase the disability workforce from the current target of 3% to a minimum of 6% by 2024; if this quota has now been exceeded; if so, the details of same; if there has been an advertised competition in relation to the quota; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41598/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department and the bodies, agencies and offices under the aegis of my Department, with the exception of An Garda Síochána, follow the Civil Service Code of Practice on the employment of people with disabilities and also adhere strictly to Equality legislation including the Disability Act 2005 and Employment Equality Acts 1998-2015. As the Deputy may be aware, Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005 which relates to Public Service Employment does not apply to An Garda Síochána.

The Deputy may wish to note that An Garda Síochána, as per their Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy Statement & Action Plan 2020-2021 are committed to developing a Code of Practice for the employment of people with disabilities to support better employment outcomes for people with disabilities in An Garda Síochána.

An Equality Policy is in place in my Department, and we are currently in the process of developing an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) strategy.

Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005 provides for a statutory report on the employment of people with disabilities in the public sector, which is submitted to the National Disability Authority (NDA). This report is compiled by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, using information provided by all public bodies staffed by civil servants, and gives details of the number of people with a disability employed in the Civil Service. The 2020 report indicated that 138 out of 2,729 Department of Justice employees, or 5.1%, reported having a disability. This exceeds the current 3% target of employment of persons with disabilities set in the Disability Act 2005.

As my Department relies on the Public Appointments Service to assign the majority of

its staff, the Department is limited in its ability to increase the percentage of staff who have a disability. However, the Department is delighted to take part in the Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) programme every year. WAM is an initiative of the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD), which offers a paid mentored work experience placement to graduates with disabilities. So far this year, two graduates with disabilities have undertaken WAM placements in the Department. In addition, a previous WAM participant now occupies a permanent role in the Department, having been successful in a PAS competition and subsequently promoted in an internal competition.

Candidates who have disabilities are provided with the necessary additional accommodations and supports at every stage of the recruitment process, including at shortlisting and interview. Candidates are invited to indicate any accessibility supports they may need as part of the communication surrounding a recruitment competition.

### Visa Agreements

874. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Justice if consideration has been given to introducing a digital nomad visa in Ireland as has been introduced in other EU countries; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41618/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) has responsibility for labour market policy in the State.

In order to access the labour market in Ireland, a non-EEA national, unless they are exempted, must hold a valid Employment Permit, issued by DETE. This is the case for both visa required and non-visa required nationals. Where the person is visa required, they must apply for an employment visa from my Department before travelling to the State.

All immigration matters are kept under review. However, I can inform the Deputy that there are currently no plans to establish an additional visa along the lines suggested.

### Naturalisation Applications

875. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Justice when a decision will be made on an application by a person (details supplied) for a certificate of naturalisation as they are now four years waiting on an outcome of their application; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41628/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** The application from the person referred to by the Deputy is currently being processed with a view to establishing whether the applicant meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision as expeditiously as possible.

The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements not only within the State but also at European Union level and it is important that appropriate procedures are in place to preserve the integrity of the process.

It is recognised that all applicants for citizenship would wish to have a decision on their application without delay. However, the nature of the naturalisation process is such that, for a broad range of reasons, some cases will take longer than others to process. In some instances,

completing the necessary checks can take a considerable period of time.

The applicant can contact the Citizenship Division of my Department at citizenshipinfo@justice.ie for up to date information on their application.

### **Peace Commissioners**

876. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Justice the number of peace commissioners appointment in County Tipperary in 2020-2021, by local electoral area; and the total number of applications in the same period. [41683/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** The Deputy will wish to note that from the beginning of 2020 to the end of August 2021, 8 Peace Commissioners were appointed in County Tipperary.

In the same period, a total of 14 applications for Peace Commissioner were received for County Tipperary.

As I informed the Deputy in my reply to Parliamentary Question number 373 on 13 May 2021, it is not possible to provide the information sought by electoral area, as the information is recorded by Garda Sub-District.

### **Immigration Support Services**

877. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice when a new appointment scheduling system for the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service can be expected; the amount spent to date on safeguarding the INIS website against third party agents; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41685/21]

878. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of Irish naturalisation and immigration service appointments estimated to have been affected by the block booking of appointments by third party agents; the number of complaints received on this matter to date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41686/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 877 and 878 together.

My Department is aware that there have been issues in the past around the securing of registration appointments and a set of software fixes were introduced in late 2018, designed to prevent such abuses of the system. The new measures have been successful to date in preventing the block booking of appointments by third party agents.

However, some third party agents continue to provide appointment booking services in return for payment on the basis that the person provides them with their personal details in advance. My Department strongly advises against this practice of providing sensitive and personal data to unregulated and unknown third parties.

Customers should continue to apply directly for appointments as they become available without charge, through the online appointments system: burghquayregistrationoffice.inis.gov.ie.

I can assure the Deputy that my Department is continually working to establish methods to

mitigate against this unregulated practice. A tender has recently been awarded for a new Immigration Service appointment and scheduling system, which will streamline and further improve the registration process. The new system is expected to be in place in the next month or so.

Figures are not maintained by my Department on the number of appointments affected by the booking of appointments by third party agents or on the number of complaints that have been received concerning this matter.

*Question No. 878 answered with Question No. 877.*

### **Immigration Support Services**

879. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Justice the efforts undertaken to ameliorate the issue of electronic bulk booking of slots for INIS appointments; the extent to which the issue has been addressed; and if further efforts are required. [41695/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** My Department is aware that there have been issues in the past around the securing of registration appointments and a set of software fixes were introduced in late 2018, designed to prevent such abuses of the system. The new measures have been successful to date in preventing the block booking of appointments by third party agents.

However, some third party agents continue to provide appointment booking services in return for payment on the basis that the person provides them with their personal details in advance. My Department strongly advises against this practice of providing sensitive and personal data to unregulated and unknown third parties.

Customers should continue to apply directly for appointments as they become available without charge through the online system at: [burghquayregistrationoffice.inis.gov.ie](http://burghquayregistrationoffice.inis.gov.ie).

A tender has also recently been awarded for a new Immigration Service appointment and scheduling system which will streamline and further improve the registration process. The new system is expected to be in place in the next month or so.

### **Prison Service**

880. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Justice the details of the prison inspection reports she currently has possession of; and when she plans to publish them. [41696/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** As the Deputy may be aware, on 3 August this year, I published the COVID - 19 Thematic Inspection reports from the Inspector of Prisons in relation to Mountjoy, Cloverhill, Wheatfield and Limerick Prisons, being the first four such reports received.

I have also received Covid -19 Thematic Reports relating to Shelton Abbey, Portlaoise, Cork and Arbour Hill prisons (the latter two received on 3 September). I intend to bring all four reports to Government in the coming weeks and to publish them shortly thereafter.

The Deputy may also wish to note that a separate report by the Inspector into a visit to the Dóchas Centre was submitted to my Department in August of 2020. Publication of this report is held for further consideration pending the completion by the Inspector of a report being carried out under section 31 (2) of the Prisons Act 2007 in relation to matters concerning the Dóchas

centre.

### **Legislative Programme**

881. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Justice her plans to reform the laws related to defamation. [41697/21]

931. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Justice the specific actions have been taken by her Department since the formation of this Government to reform the defamation laws; and her future plans in relation to same. [42689/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 881 and 931 together.

The review of the Defamation Act 2009 is a legislative priority for the Government and my Department.

The Justice Plan 2021 restates the Programme for Government commitment to review and reform our defamation laws to ensure a balanced approach to the right to freedom of expression and the right to protection of good name and reputation, as well as ensuring effective access to justice.

I expect to bring a report of the defamation review, with options for change to the law, to government. As outlined in the Justice Plan 2021, it is intended that a General Scheme of a Defamation (Amendment) Bill will be prepared by the end of this year.

As a measure of the Government's commitment to this reform, the Defamation (Amendment) Bill, to implement the resulting legislative changes, is already included in the Government's updated Legislation Programme, which was published in January 2021.

It is a priority for me and my Department to get the reform of defamation law right, and to bring forward the required legislation at the earliest opportunity.

In advance of completion of the review of the Defamation Act 2009, Schedule 1 of the 2009 Act was amended by the Part 20 of the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union (Consequential Provisions) Act 2020.

The purpose of the amendments was to ensure that post-Brexit, fair and accurate reporting of certain statements, meetings and press conferences held in the UK continue to be protected against claims of defamation, by the defence of qualified privilege, in exactly the same manner as it was prior to Brexit. The need for the amendments arose because several provisions in the 2009 Act, as enacted, regarding the 'qualified privilege' defence, applied to reports of statements, meetings, etc. which occur in an EU Member State. The amendments simply amended these provisions to refer to reports of matters occurring in a Member State or the United Kingdom. The amendments responded to concerns expressed by the media in relation to the effects of Brexit on the defence of qualified privilege.

### **Residency Permits**

882. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the current or expected residency status in the case of persons (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41719/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** Applications for a Permanent Residence Card by the persons referred to by the Deputy were made on 19 November 2018. Following examination, a decision to refuse the applications was made on 13 February 2020.

The applicants were advised that they could request a review of the decision if they felt that the deciding officer had erred in fact or in law and that any request for a review of the decision must be made on Form EU4 within 15 working days. No requests for review were received by my Department.

A review of a decision made under the provisions of the European Communities (Free Movement of Persons) Regulations 2015 is ongoing in respect of one of the applicants referred to by the Deputy. This applicant also currently has Stamp 4 permission, which is valid until 11 March 2022.

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](mailto: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.

### Legislative Measures

883. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice her plans to bring forward amendments in relation to the Criminal Justice (Spent Convictions and Certain Disclosures) Act 2016. [41729/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Government commits in the Programme for Government to reviewing the Criminal Justice (Spent Convictions and Certain Disclosures) Act 2016 and to broaden the range of convictions that are considered spent. As part of this review process, a public consultation on spent convictions was launched in October 2020. My Department is continuing work on identifying and assessing the possible implications of amending the 2016 Act so that the fairest possible outcomes can be achieved for the public.

In that regard, the Deputy may be aware that the Government did not oppose a Private Members Bill – Criminal Justice (Rehabilitative Periods) Bill 2018 - on this subject as it passed Report and Final Stages in the Seanad on 28 June 2021. This Bill proposes to amend and considerably extend the 2016 Act. The Government has noted my intention to bring forward amendments to this Bill in Dáil Éireann and I look forward to doing so later this year.

### Prison Service

884. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Justice the estimated cost to provide an additional staff grade psychologist in a prison. [41774/21]

885. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Justice the estimated cost to provide at least one staff grade psychologist in every prison. [41775/21]

886. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Justice the estimated cost to run recruitment campaigns to fill all existing psychologist vacancies in prisons. [41776/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 884 to 886, inclusive, together.

As the Deputy will be aware, the role of the Psychology Service in the Irish Prison Service is to deliver, develop and manage an integrated (mental health and criminogenic need) assessment and treatment service for people in custody. This is done in line with service plans and objectives and within established professional standards, guidelines and policy. I am informed that the Irish Prison Service employs a number of Psychologist grades, including;

- Head of Psychological Services,
- Principal Psychologist Manager,
- Senior Psychologists (Grade I),
- Staff Grade Psychologists (Grade II) and
- Assistant Psychologists.

Assistant Psychologists are an unqualified grade, employed on a one year fixed term contract basis only and are not included in client to Psychologist ratios.

The information sought by the Deputy in respect of the estimated cost of providing an additional Staff Grade Psychologist to a prison is provided in Table 1 -

**Table 1 - Payscale of Staff Grade Psychologist appointed after 6 April 1995**

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq884-886-09-09-21\_en.docx">payscale</a>]

Payscale as at 1 October 2020

The estimated cost of providing at least one Staff Grade Psychologist in every prison is provided in Table 2 -

**Table 2- Cost of providing at least one Staff Grade Psychologist in each prison (12 in total)**

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq884-886a-09-09-21\_en.docx">table2</a>]

The figures provided are per annum and are based on the incremental payscale provided in Table 1.

The estimated cost to administer recruitment campaigns to fill Psychologist vacancies varies from campaign to campaign, influenced by factors such as grade of vacancy, advertising cost and interview related expenses.

*Question No. 885 answered with Question No. 884.*

*Question No. 886 answered with Question No. 884.*

### **Family Law Cases**

887. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Justice if she will commit to a review of the operation of the section 47 assessment system in contentious custody and access cases

(details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41792/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** Section 47 of the Family Law Act 1995 provides that the Circuit Court or High Court may order a report in writing on any question affecting the welfare of a party to family law proceedings or any other person to whom they relate.

Section 3 of the Guardianship of Infants Act 1964 provides that the best interests of the child shall be the paramount consideration for the court in any proceedings where guardianship, custody or upbringing of, or access to, a child is in question. Section 32(1) of the 1964 Act provides that in such proceedings, the court may do either or both of the following:

(a) give directions for the purpose of procuring a written report from an expert on any question affecting the welfare of the child; or

(b) appoint an expert to determine and convey the child's views.

Assessors and experts in family law proceedings are formally appointed by the court itself, and answer to the presiding judge in a specific case.

As the Deputy is aware, the Courts are, subject only to the Constitution and the law, independent in the exercise of their statutory functions and the conduct of any family law case is a matter for the presiding judge.

The forthcoming Family Court Bill will provide for a dedicated Family Court structure, as set out in the Programme for Government.

This significant piece of legislation will be a key element of the development of a more efficient and user-friendly family court system that puts families at the centre of its activities, provides access to specialist supports and encourages the use of alternative dispute resolution in family law proceedings. The development of sensible, comprehensive and sensitive family law procedures, particularly for vulnerable families, will be central to the new system. My Department has also established a Family Justice Oversight Group to agree a high-level vision and key medium and longer-term objectives for the development of a national family justice system in parallel with the establishment of a dedicated Family Court structure as envisaged by the Family Court Bill.

### **Inquiry into the Death of Mr. Shane O'Farrell**

888. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice when the statutory inquiry into the death of a person (details supplied) will commence. [41717/21]

905. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Justice when the final report by person (details supplied) in respect to the circumstances surrounding the death of a person will be finalised; and if she plans to publish the report in full. [42284/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 888 and 905 together.

I wish to assure the Deputy that I recognise the ongoing pain of the O'Farrell family on the tragic death of Shane and deeply sympathise with them on their loss.

As the Deputy will be aware, a highly respected retired Judge, Gerard Haughton, has been conducting a scoping exercise into the tragic circumstances surrounding Shane O'Farrell's

death.

The purpose of this exercise is to advise as to whether any further investigation or inquiry beyond those already carried out is necessary and if so to advise on the form of such investigation or inquiry and its terms of reference.

Judge Haughton furnished an interim report to the then Minister for Justice in November 2019. In his interim report, the Judge stated that he would not restrict or limit Shane's family in their submissions to him or the nature and extent of the documentation they wished to furnish to him in his scoping exercise.

As the Deputy will appreciate, the Judge is completely independent in conducting this scoping exercise. It is not open to me as Minister to comment on any aspect of the Judge's work or the process of compiling the final report. My Department maintains regular contact with the Judge and has assured him that any assistance he requires to complete his final report will be made available.

While I genuinely regret that this process has taken significantly longer than any of us would like, I am also aware that the Judge is doing all that he can to ensure that the concerns which the family have raised with him during the process are followed through to the greatest extent possible. I understand that Judge Haughton has been in contact with the O'Farrell family throughout his scoping exercise.

Judge Haughton recently wrote to my Department seeking comments on one specific section of the draft report. The Department further understands that Judge Haughton has been in touch with the O'Farrell family regarding this matter. Following receipt of responses from all relevant parties, it is understood that Judge Haughton will be in a position to finalise his report. My Department will continue to provide all necessary assistance to the Judge, and I look forward to receiving his final report in due course.

Following receipt of the final report, the advice of the Attorney General will be sought on publication and any other issues arising.

### **Immigration Status**

**889. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of a case pursuant to section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended) in the case of persons (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41862/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** In response to separate notifications pursuant to the provisions of section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), the persons concerned have submitted written representations to my Department. These representations, together with all other information and documentation on file, will be fully considered, under section 3 (6) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended) and all other applicable legislation, in advance of final decisions being made.

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](mailto: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.

## Direct Provision System

890. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Justice when the findings of a review of the opening of a direct provision centre (details supplied) will be published; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41896/21]

893. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Justice the status of her review into a direct provision centre (details supplied); its completion status before IPAS functions were transferred to the Minister for Children; and if the finalised report has been received by her. [41931/21]

894. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Justice the status of the review into a direct provision centre (details supplied); the completion status before IPAS functions were transferred; and if the finalised report has been received by her. [41932/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 890, 893 and 894 together.

Unfortunately, it has not been possible to provide the information requested by the Deputy in the time available. I will write to the Deputy directly once the information is to hand.

*Question No. 891 answered with Question No. 867.*

## Departmental Data

892. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Justice the number of knives seized from 2016 to date in 2021, by county; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41925/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** The Government is very conscious of the dangers presented by knife crime, and indeed all violent assaults. Clearly any stabbing has the potential to cause irreparable physical harm and tragic consequences and the Government is determined to ensure that similar problems to those which have developed in neighbouring jurisdictions do not develop here in Ireland.

There is a comprehensive and robust legal framework in place with respect to knife crime, including heavy penalties for breaches of the laws concerned. Under the provisions of the Criminal Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009, the maximum penalty for a conviction for possessing a knife in a public place without good reason or lawful authority was increased from one to five years. An Garda Síochána also has an extended power of search without warrant for knives and offensive weapons and Gardaí have secured a substantial number of convictions in the Courts in recent years for possession of a knife or other weapon. That said, the Department will continue to keep sentencing policy under ongoing review and will review existing Garda powers in relation to dangerous weapons, including knives, to ensure they have the necessary legal tools to protect our communities.

I am advised by the Garda authorities that the following are the statistics, as of 16 August 2021, for the numbers of knives seized by Garda Division in each of the years 2016 to 2021.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq892-09-09-21\_en.docx">table</a>]

The Deputy will appreciate that these statistics are based upon operational data from the PULSE system as was available on 16 August 2021 and are liable to change.

I am further informed by the Garda authorities that the 2016-2018 increase in recorded sei-

zures is due in large part to the introduction of the Property and Exhibit Management System (PEMS) which improved the level of recording of all objects seized, including knives.

More recently, the increases in seizures are also due to proactive policing operations, particularly during 2020 with the increased Garda presence due to the COVID-19 public health response. There was a 4.7% increase in the number of knives seized between 2019-2020 (2,143 in 2019 and 2,248 in 2020). There was also a substantial year-on-year increase in the number of searches conducted in 2020 – many of which were associated with An Garda Síochána's high visibility operations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Question No. 893 answered with Question No. 890.*

*Question No. 894 answered with Question No. 890.*

### **Flexible Work Practices**

895. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Justice the measures she is taking to promote or facilitate remote working for staff in her Department or bodies under the aegis of her Department; the costs this has generated in terms of the provision of laptops, desktop computers or contributions to wi-fi costs or phone-related expenses; the number of staff who have applied for permission to work from home on a permanent or hybrid-model basis (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41957/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As the Deputy will be aware, all Government Departments, Agencies and Offices are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

The proposed Blended Working Framework paper sets out a number of core principles to apply to blended working across the Civil Service post-COVID. Key to all this is the duty of Departments to deliver a quality service to Government, the Oireachtas and the public with flexibility and agility. There is recognition also of a need to create opportunities for people to balance their working and personal lives more effectively where possible.

My Department has commenced work on developing its own blended working policy and arrangements, which take into account our specific business needs and requirements, while remaining grounded in the Civil Service Framework. Blended working arrangements are expected to be implemented by March 2022.

In the interim, my Department will begin the process of reintroducing staff safely to the office environment, with preparations underway to start transitioning from 20 September to facilitate teams working together in the office one day a week. This transition phase will also help to inform future blended working policies and practice. All transition arrangements remain subject to change and are dependent on the public health advice in place during that time.

The Deputy will appreciate that many of the bodies and agencies under my Department's remit provide frontline services and have been committed to maintaining these essential services to the public throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The organisations facilitate remote working where possible in accordance with the public health advice where operational and business needs allow but obviously this is not possible for frontline staff in agencies such as An Garda

Síochána, the Irish Prison Service, Forensic Science Ireland and others. I can assure the Deputy that future blended working arrangements will take operational requirements into account and will be in line with Government policy and public health guidelines.

It has not been possible to collate the detailed information on costs within the timeframe allowed. I will provide this information to the Deputy as soon as it is to hand.

### **Immigration Status**

896. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Justice the status of an application for a stamp 1G extension by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41999/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** An application for an extension of Stamp 1G permission from the person referred to by the Deputy was approved on 17 August 2021. A letter issued to them on that date granting an extension of their Stamp 1G permission until 24 September 2022.

A Stamp 1G indicates that a person has permission to look for employment in the State under the Third Level Graduate Programme. The Stamp 1G is granted for 12 months to ensure that such students are making genuine efforts to access suitable graduate level employment, for example attending job interviews or signing up with graduate employment agencies. However, it is recognised that, due to the impact of Covid-19, some people may not have been able to find graduate level employment before their Stamp 1G permission is due to expire. Therefore, in an effort to assist such people, my Department is considering any applications for an extension of Stamp 1G immigration permission on a case by case basis.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility at [INISOireachtasMail@justice.ie](mailto:INISOireachtasMail@justice.ie), which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Question process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in the cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

### **Immigration Support Services**

897. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice when first-time appointments at the Immigration Service, Burgh Quay, Dublin 2 will resume; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42010/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** I can inform the Deputy that the Burgh Quay Registration Office for customers in the Dublin area reopened on 10 May 2021. Customers can apply directly for appointments through the online system at: <https://burghquayregistrationoffice.inis.gov.ie>.

A tender has also recently been awarded for a new Immigration Service appointment and scheduling system, which will streamline and further improve the registration process. The new system is expected to be in place in the next month or so.

An online registration system is also available to all customers residing in the Dublin area, who wish to renew their immigration permission.

## **Deportation Orders**

898. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Justice the number of deportation letters issued to Afghani citizens who are resident in Ireland by month to date in 2021. [42026/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** No deportation orders have been issued to Afghan nationals this year.

Furthermore, no existing deportation orders for Afghan nationals will be enforced in the current circumstances. For those with an existing deportation order, a request can be made to revoke the order. Any such request will be prioritised.

## **Court Procedures**

899. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Justice the number of times each year in which section 2 of the Criminal Law (Defence and the Dwelling) Act 2011 was used as the reason that a case should not be prosecuted; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42031/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Director of Public Prosecutions is an independent law officer under the provisions of the Prosecution of Offences Act 1974 (as amended). The Office of the DPP is within the vote group of the Department of the Taoiseach and I have no role in the functions of the Director or the Office of the DPP.

As Minister for Justice, it is not appropriate for me to engage with the Director in the matters raised by the Deputy, or any other matters.

## **Humanitarian Access**

900. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Justice if she has considered introducing a specific humanitarian programme similar to previous SHAP or International Humanitarian Access Programme to enable Afghan and Irish citizens living in Ireland to apply for visas for their family members; if so, when the arrangements will be in place; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42120/21]

936. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice if she will put in place humanitarian admission for Afghans at high risk of persecution including persons who have worked with the EU, humanitarian organisations and women and girls at risk of persecution. [42796/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 900 and 936 together.

In response to the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, my Department is currently focused on processing applications for Afghan family members of Irish citizens and Afghan nationals living in Ireland.

In line with announced Government commitments, the admission of ‘programme refugees’ under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) is being led primarily by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth who have overall responsibility for the IRPP. My Department is providing practical support by way of issuing humanitarian visas to facilitate travel to Ireland.

Priority has been given to those working on human rights issues, including the rights of women and girls and minorities, as well as those working with NGOs and European and international organisations. To date, my Department has recently issued more than 290 humanitarian visas or visa letters for this cohort.

Under the IHAP, which has closed to new applicants, approximately 70 Afghan nationals have been issued with immigration status letters by my Department so far this year, enabling them to reside and work in the State.

One hundred and four Afghan family members have been granted family reunification so far this year under the International Protection Act 2015, and applications in respect of a further 64 people are being actively processed by my Department.

Similarly, visa applications for Afghan family members of Irish citizens and Afghan nationals living in Ireland are being assessed speedily and sympathetically. Any person that wishes to make an application for a visa to join a family member already living in Ireland, can do so online at: [www.visas.inis.gov.ie/avats/OnlineHome.aspx](http://www.visas.inis.gov.ie/avats/OnlineHome.aspx). Eligible family members are generally dependent family including spouses, civil partners and children under the age of 18.

Anyone who wishes to apply to bring an elderly dependent to live with them in Ireland under a Stamp 0 permission can find further information on: [www.irishimmigration.ie/coming-to-join-family-in-ireland/joining-a-non-eea-non-swiss-national/dependent-elderly-relative/](http://www.irishimmigration.ie/coming-to-join-family-in-ireland/joining-a-non-eea-non-swiss-national/dependent-elderly-relative/).

My Department is currently reviewing all international protection applications on hand from Afghan nationals with a view to expediting their progress, in line with updated advices provided by UNHCR in recent weeks. These applications are already prioritised, as agreed with UNHCR. The processing of these applications takes full account of whether a person will be in danger if not provided with a permission to remain here.

My Department continues to work closely with the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to monitor and respond to the evolving situation in Afghanistan. As I have outlined, our current focus is on processing all existing and new applications on hand speedily and sympathetically.

Minister Humphreys and I have directed our officials to examine, as a matter of urgency, proposals for a humanitarian admission programme whereby persons resident in Ireland could apply for family members in Afghanistan to be granted admission to Ireland. The introduction of any new scheme along similar lines to the previous SHAP and IHAP programmes would require a Government decision.

### **Citizenship Applications**

901. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** 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. [42137/21]

**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 22 March 2019. This application is currently being processed with a view to establishing whether the applicant meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision as expeditiously as possible.

The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is a privilege and an honour which

confers certain rights and entitlements not only within the State but also at European Union level and it is important that appropriate procedures are in place to preserve the integrity of the process.

It is recognised that all applicants for citizenship would wish to have a decision on their application without delay. However, the nature of the naturalisation process is such that, for a broad range of reasons, some cases will take longer than others to process. In some instances, completing the necessary checks can take a considerable period of time.

### **Commissioners for Oaths**

902. **Deputy John Paul Phelan** asked the Minister for Justice if she will provide this Deputy with a list (details supplied). [42155/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** Commissioners for Oaths are appointed by the Chief Justice sitting in open court. Under the provisions of the Courts Service Act 1998, management of the courts is the responsibility of the Courts Service, which is independent in its functions.

Queries from Oireachtas Members can be made directly to the Courts Service's dedicated email address at: [oireachtasenquiries@courts.ie](mailto:oireachtasenquiries@courts.ie).

However, in order to be of assistance to the Deputy, I have had enquiries made and the Courts Service has provided the following list of those, which I am informed, have been appointed as Commissioner of Oaths in the areas specified:

Michael Buggy

Tomas O'Dubhshlaine

Denis O'Leary

Liam Nolan

Marion Kilbride

Mairead McEvoy

Mary Ryan

Michael F Grace

Seamus Leahy

Brian Leonard

Claire Roberts

Esther Roberts

Matthew Cullen

Mary C Byrne

Paula Fleming

James Brady

Denis O’Leary

Raymond Keyes

Lorraine Hynes

Noeleen Forde Cuffe

### **Legal Aid**

903. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Justice if the relocation of the Legal Aid Board office in County Waterford has been brought to her attention; if discussions have taken place with staff of that office concerning the move; if she has given formal consent under section 3(2) of the Civil Legal Aid Act 1995 for this new premises; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42170/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Legal Aid Board provides legal advice and aid under the relevant terms of the Civil Legal Aid Act 1995 and the Civil Legal Aid Regulations 1996-2017. Section 3(3) of the Act provides that the Board shall, subject to the provisions of the Act, be independent in the exercise of its functions.

The location of offices of the Legal Aid Board is also subject to the Civil Legal Aid Regulations 1996 (S.I no. 273 of 1996), which give effect to the relevant provisions of Section 37 of the 1995 Act. Regulation no. 22 (1) states that,

“In deciding on the location of law centres, the Board shall have regard to –

(a) the need to provide reasonable access to their services on a nationwide basis,

(b) the desirability of providing, so far as possible, ready access to their services in the areas where the need for those services is greatest, and

(c) the need to use available resources in a way likely to result in maximum benefit for persons in need of legal aid or advice

and in considering these matters the Board shall take account of any views expressed by local and other interests but the decision finally in each case shall be a matter entirely for the Board”.

In relation to the issue of consent under section 3(2) of the Civil Legal Aid Act 1995, I can confirm that this is a matter on which the Board is engaged with my Department.

### **Crime Prevention**

904. **Deputy Fergus O’Dowd** asked the Minister for Justice if she will respond to concerns and proposals (details supplied) in relation to a possible deterrent for scam calls which have increased exponentially here over the past 12 months; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42259/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Telecommunications policy and regulation is a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications, to whom I note this question has also been directed. As the Deputy will be aware, the

prevention and investigation of any criminal activity, including that associated with such ‘scam calls’, are strictly operational matters for the Garda Commissioner. As Minister for Justice I have no direct role in these matters.

However, I want to say that I share the Deputy’s concern as to the number of ‘scam calls’ being received by people in Ireland in recent times. I am informed that the Garda National Economic Crime Bureau and the Garda National Cyber Crime Bureau proactively engages with telecommunications providers to suspend VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) numbers which are suspected of being used to commit fraud and it is the experience of An Garda Síochána that telecommunication companies based in Ireland will provide assistance in the suspension of such numbers upon notification that they are being used to commit fraud offences. I would therefore urge people to notify the Gardaí if they are contacted by someone they suspect to be trying to defraud them.

Both the Garda National Economic Crime Bureau and the Garda National Cyber Crime Bureau continue to engage with telecommunications service providers regarding the kinds of scam raised by the Deputy and the identification of the persons involved.

*Question No. 905 answered with Question No. 888.*

### **Gambling Sector**

906. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Justice her plans to introduce legislation to prohibit on-line gambling websites from restricting winning customers online while putting no restriction on losing gamblers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42315/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** My Department’s Justice Plan 2021 identifies the enactment of legislation to licence and regulate the gambling industry as a key objective. The Programme for Government gives a clear 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 quarter three 2021. There is a clear path towards the regulator being fully operational in early 2023.

When it is 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. Operators offering activities in whole or in part online, will be subject to the licensing terms and conditions as set out by the regulator. Matters regarding enforcement will also be for the gambling regulator.

Key objectives of the regulator will be preventing gambling from being a source or support to crime, ensuring that gambling is conducted in a fair and open way for companies to make decisions in certainty, and requiring safeguards including in relation to gambling advertising.

Furthermore, given the size, complexity and technological development of the modern gambling industry and having regard to the current outdated and complex arrangements, it will be important that the regulator will be established on a sound footing and be adequately resourced to carry out this important task.

Further details on the functions and powers of the regulator will be outlined in the Scheme.

## Citizenship Applications

907. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** 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. [42340/21]

**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 22 July 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.

## Citizenship Applications

908. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** 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. [42341/21]

**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 February 2020. This application is currently being processed with a view to establishing whether the applicant meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision as expeditiously as possible.

The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements not only within the State but also at European Union level and it is important that appropriate procedures are in place to preserve the integrity of the process.

It is recognised that all applicants for citizenship would wish to have a decision on their application without delay. However, the nature of the naturalisation process is such that, for a broad range of reasons, some cases will take longer than others to process. In some instances, completing the necessary checks can take a considerable period of time.

## Family Reunification

909. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Justice the process through which a person who has qualified for refugee status in the State but who has young children in their home country may go about seeking to bring their children to Ireland. [42346/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** A person can

apply for family reunification under the International Protection Act 2015 if they have been granted a declaration as a Convention Refugee, are a beneficiary of Subsidiary Protection or if they have been granted Programme Refugee status.

Under Section 56 of the 2015 Act, the following family members are eligible for family reunification:

- Spouse - the marriage must have subsisted on the date the application for international protection in the State was lodged;

- Civil Partner- the civil partnership must have subsisted on the date the application for international protection in the State was lodged;

- Parent(s) and their children (under 18 and unmarried) if the sponsor was under 18 and unmarried on the date the application for family reunification in the State was lodged; and

- A child of the sponsor, who is under the age of 18 and unmarried when the sponsor made an application for family reunification in the State.

Applications for Family Reunification under the 2015 Act can be made to my Department by email to FRU\_IPA@justice.ie or in hard copy to Family Reunification Unit, Department of Justice, 13-14 Burgh Quay, Dublin 2.

Full details on the application process can be found on my Department's website at: [www.irishimmigration.ie/coming-to-join-family-in-ireland/family-reunification-of-international-protection-holders/](http://www.irishimmigration.ie/coming-to-join-family-in-ireland/family-reunification-of-international-protection-holders/).

## **Deportation Orders**

910. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the position regarding the request to set-aside a deportation order in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42360/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** The person referred to by the Deputy is the subject of a Deportation Order made on 1 February 2019. However, they made a request on 23 October 2020, under section 3(11) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), to have that Order revoked. This request will be considered as soon as possible. The decision will be that the existing Deportation Order will either be 'affirmed' or 'revoked'.

In the meantime, they are legally obliged to comply with any reporting obligations placed on them by the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB).

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](mailto: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.

## **Naturalisation Applications**

911. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Justice the status of a naturalisation application by a family (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42390/21]

**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 17 September 2019. This application is currently being processed with a view to establishing whether the applicant meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision as expeditiously as possible.

The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements not only within the State but also at European Union level and it is important that appropriate procedures are in place to preserve the integrity of the process.

It is recognised that all applicants for citizenship would wish to have a decision on their application without delay. However, the nature of the naturalisation process is such that, for a broad range of reasons, some cases will take longer than others to process. In some instances, completing the necessary checks can take a considerable period of time.

### **Visa Applications**

912. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Justice the qualifying income criteria for a visa application for an elderly dependent in cases in which family reunification is being applied for; her plans to examine these criteria; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42415/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** My Department's Non EEA Policy Document on Family Reunification sets out the criteria for sponsors who wish to have their elderly dependents join them in the State.

The financial thresholds for earnings to support an elderly dependent relative must be high enough to meet the foreseeable expense. Therefore, a sponsor of an elderly dependent relative is required to have earned in Ireland in each of the three years preceding the application an income after tax and deductions of not less than €60,000 in the case of one parent and €75,000 where two parents are involved.

Where the elderly dependent relative has a guaranteed income into the future, this can be used to partially offset the financial limits (bearing in mind however that a person with a sufficient personal income for their needs cannot reasonably be regarded as being financially dependent).

For elderly persons of independent means, the financial threshold is generally considered to be a lump sum to purchase a property in the State plus an income in excess of €50,000 per person per annum. Each application is dealt with on a case by case basis.

Any elderly dependent granted a permission to join their family member in the State will be granted a Stamp 0 immigration permission. An inherent condition of their residence permission is that they are required to be self-sufficient. They are not permitted to avail of State benefits while resident here on a Stamp 0 basis even if they acquire an entitlement to such benefits. Holders of Stamp 0 are also not allowed to work, operate a business or engage in a profession in the State. They must also have private medical insurance to cover the duration of their stay. A Stamp 0 may also be granted to persons who can demonstrate sufficient funds to ensure they will not become a burden on the State.

While all immigration permissions are kept under review, currently, there are no plans to revise the existing thresholds for elderly dependents.

### **Citizenship Applications**

913. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** 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. [42427/21]

**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 February 2020. This application is currently being processed with a view to establishing whether the applicant meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision as expeditiously as possible.

The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements not only within the State but also at European Union level and it is important that appropriate procedures are in place to preserve the integrity of the process.

It is recognised that all applicants for citizenship would wish to have a decision on their application without delay. However, the nature of the naturalisation process is such that, for a broad range of reasons, some cases will take longer than others to process. In some instances, completing the necessary checks can take a considerable period of time.

### **An Garda Síochána**

914. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Justice if she will update Dáil Éireann on matters in relation to the GSOC report on the death of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42492/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Deputy will be aware that both GSOC and the Garda Commissioner are independent in the exercise of their duties and I, as Minister, have no role in this regard.

However, in order to assist the Deputy I have made enquires with GSOC seeking an update on the issues raised in the finalised report and subsequent correspondence sent to An Garda Síochána.

As the Deputy will be aware from the correspondence referred to, the issues raised in the report related to the safe keeping of exhibits and related evidence by An Garda Síochána. I am informed by GSOC that they received a detailed response from the Garda Commissioner's office in July 2018 which expressed regret in relation to these circumstances, and set out the significant changes which have taken place within An Garda Síochána since the original investigation, and which mitigate against such material being misplaced or lost, into the future.

In particular, I am advised that An Garda Síochána have progressed the implementation of a new Property and Exhibit Management System (PEMS) and an electronic Investigation Management System (IMS), which greatly enhance the capacity of An Garda Síochána to manage and store exhibits. The establishment of the Serious Crime Review Team (SCRT), under the auspices of the National Bureau of Criminal Investigation, as well as the creation of the role of Senior Investigating Officer (SIO) also contribute to the better management of investigations

and the exhibits associated with them.

### **Departmental Funding**

915. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Justice if central funding is available for the continuation of existing text alert schemes; the details of the funding process; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42509/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As the Deputy will be aware, my Department provides funding to Muintir na Tíre to cover costs incurred by communities in administering the Text Alert Scheme. The scheme is administered on a refund basis whereby communities submit their annual costs to Muintir na Tíre and a maximum refund of up to €350 is provided to the community.

For the last two years, my Department has committed to funding of up to €150,000 toward the costs of the scheme and, based on the number of applications received, it has had an average cost of €120,000 per annum. In January this year, and recognising the increased use of the alert scheme during the pandemic, Minister McEntee approved an increase in the individual cap paid to communities to €450 for the 2020 scheme only.

A further adjustment to the 2020 funding was made to address the fact that the scheme moved to costs incurred between January and December. Previously the scheme ran from September to September. To accommodate this adjustment, Minister of State Browne approved an increase to the total budget of the Text Alert Scheme for 2020 from €150,000 to a maximum of €200,000 to cover the additional period between September and end December 2019.

My officials have been engaging with Muintir na Tíre in relation to continuing this scheme including reviewing whether newer technologies, including apps, would be appropriate for use. In terms of funding for the 2021 Scheme, a final decision has yet to be made but I can assure the Deputy that I am fully committed to continuing to support this scheme.

### **Crime Prevention**

916. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Justice if she will take appropriate action to deal with the prevalence of illegal fireworks being set off in the greater Dublin area in recent weeks; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42510/21]

922. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice if she will request An Garda Síochána to commence Operation Tombola again in 2021 to tackle the increased use of fireworks and bonfires in Dublin; if she will provide additional funding for the operation to take place at this earlier point; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42604/21]

929. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Justice the status of Operation Tombola 2021; the additional resources allocated to the operation; the commencement date of the operation; if a comparison will be made to same during operation tombola in 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42646/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 916, 922 and 929 together.

Fireworks, because they are explosives, are regulated under national and EU legislation and can only be imported into the country under licence and stored and sold in accordance

with explosives law. Government policy restricts the availability of all hazardous fireworks to the general public. Licences under the Explosives Act are issued by my Department only for the importation of fireworks which are to be used in organised displays conducted by professional and competent operators.

Part 6 of the Criminal Justice Act 2006 gives An Garda Síochána the power to make arrests in relation to the possession of unlicensed fireworks. An example of the penalties faced include a fine of up to €10,000 and up to five years imprisonment if convicted of having fireworks in your possession with intent to sell or supply. Igniting fireworks or throwing an ignited firework at a person or property is also liable to the same severe penalty. These penalties demonstrate the seriousness attached to breaches of the legislation governing the importation and use of fireworks.

I am aware of the distressing impact the improper use of fireworks has on our communities and I share the concerns of the Deputies and of the local communities affected. I know the fear and distress fireworks being set off causes our elderly family members and neighbours and people with sensory challenges and other vulnerabilities. They also have a terrible impact on pets and other animals and livestock.

That is why every year as Halloween approaches, my Department runs a safety campaign aimed at ensuring the public is aware of the dangers of illegal fireworks and bonfires. Taking into account the issues arising and highlighted to me last year, my officials are currently collaborating with a number of relevant bodies such as An Garda Síochána, the Dublin Fire Brigade, the Irish Society for the Prevent of Cruelty to Animals, as well as the local authorities around the country in order to ensure that our messaging for this year is clear, impactful and ready to be launched and rolled out before the end of this month. As always, this messaging will continue to be pushed out across a number of mediums including social media on a regular basis until early November.

In addition to the awareness raising work undertaken by my Department in the run up to Halloween, additional efforts are made by An Garda Síochána at this time of year to combat the illegal importation, sale and use of fireworks, which is known as Operation Tombola.

Operation Tombola also focuses on preventing associated public disorder and anti-social behaviour through the incremental deployment of resources, including Garda Public Order Units to augment local plans as appropriate. The Garda Commissioner has informed me that under Operation Tombola, Assistant Commissioner (DMR) has already issued an instruction to each Chief Superintendent in the DMR to put in place appropriate measures to prevent and detect the organised importation for sale of fireworks in the lead up to Halloween, 2021.

The Assistant Commissioner (DMR) has tasked each Chief Superintendent in the DMR to examine their policing requirements for the Halloween period and to effectively resource and implement their policing plans for this period.

I understand that each Chief Superintendent in the DMR is in the process of engaging with relevant stakeholders including the local authorities to identify, coordinate and implement an appropriate multi-agency strategy for the Halloween period, as part of their policing plans and that the Assistant Commissioner (DMR) has tasked Detective Superintendent, DMR Coordination and Tasking Unit, with ensuring open social media is monitored for any information in connection with anti-social behaviour and fireworks that may inform local Garda operations and initiatives.

In addition to the above measures, the Garda National Community Engagement Bureau have also developed a Halloween safety advice presentation that is aimed at parents/guardians,

and which is available for Gardaí to use as part of the Community Policing Toolkit when engaging with community groups or watch schemes. This places emphasis on tips for safety around bonfires and fireworks, emphasising the illegality of the latter and explaining the distress that Halloween can cause to animals and the elderly.

A revised primary schools programme has also been developed focussing on these areas and emphasises that it is the job of the Gardaí to keep children safe. Where it is not possible to deliver these presentations in person, an alternative proposes to use a safety video produced in partnership with Dublin Fire Brigade and Temple Street Children's Hospital, which informs children of the law in relation to fireworks and the dangers associated with them. It also provides fire safety advice and, with the help of the Garda Dogs Unit, it addresses the distress experienced by animals. Supporting posters and social media material are also available for download from the Community Policing Toolkit.

Finally, I believe that it is important to state that in addition to Part 6 of the Criminal Justice Act 2006 referenced above, there are a number of strong legislative provisions available to Gardaí to combat anti-social behaviour more generally which include –

- the Criminal Damage Act 1991;
- Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 1994;
- the Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 2003; and
- the Intoxicating Liquor Acts 2003 and 2008.

### **Legislative Process**

917. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Justice when the sex offenders (amendment) Bill will be published; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42529/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** The Sex Offenders (Amendment) Bill has completed drafting and I intend to bring it to my Government colleagues for approval to publish in the coming weeks.

As the Deputy will be aware, the purpose of the Bill is to enhance current systems for the assessment and management of convicted sex offenders and to put those systems on a statutory footing.

### **Residency Permits**

918. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of an application for leave to remain in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42578/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** The immigration case of the person concerned was finalised on 29 October 2019. Leave to remain in the State was refused and a Deportation Order was made. That Order was served on the person concerned by registered post dated 10 January 2020, and was sent to their last notified address. This communication was copied to their legal representative on the same date.

This Deportation Order remains valid and in place. As such, the person concerned remains

legally obliged to comply with any reporting requirements placed on them by the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB). The enforcement of a Deportation Order is an operational matter for GNIB.

It is open to any person who is the subject of a Deportation Order to make a request, under section 3(11) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), to have that Order revoked. Any such request would, however, need to be founded on some material change in the person's circumstances which has arisen since the original decision to deport was made. Where such a request is made, the outcome of that request will be that the existing Deportation Order will either be 'affirmed' or 'revoked'.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility (inisoireachtasmail@justice.ie), 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.

### **Immigration Status**

919. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date to regularise their status in the case of persons (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42579/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** My Department has no record of having received an immigration application on behalf of the persons referred to by the Deputy.

If they are in the State without an immigration permission, they must engage with the authorities if they wish to be permitted to remain here legally. Therefore, I would encourage them to contact the Immigration Service of my Department or their local immigration office and to take all appropriate steps to regularise their status.

In order to allow for a full examination of their circumstances, they should write directly to Unit 2, Residence Division, Immigration Service, 13-14 Burgh Quay, Dublin 2, DO2 XK70. They should outline if they have had a previous permission to reside in the State, their current circumstances and future intentions in the State and provide any documentation they feel will support their case.

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.

### **Immigration Status**

920. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the current position in relation to the determination of residency status in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42580/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** I can advise the Deputy that, in response to a notification pursuant to the provisions of Section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), the person concerned has not, to date, submitted written representations. Therefore, their position in the State will now be decided by reference to the provisions of Section 3 (6) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended) and all other applicable legislation. If any representations are submitted, they will be considered before a final decision is made.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility ([inisoireachtasmail@justice.ie](mailto:inisoireachtasmail@justice.ie)), which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

### Visa Applications

921. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of visa applications in the case of persons (details supplied); when visas can expect to issue; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42584/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** The persons referred to by the Deputy created an online Join Family (Non-EEA national) visa application on 29 March 2021. The supporting documentation and fee were received on 10 May 2021 in the Abuja Visa Office. The application is awaiting comprehensive examination and they will be notified as soon as a decision has been reached by a Visa Officer.

The processing of family reunification visa applications, such as these, may take up to six months to determine from date documentation is received in the relevant Visa Office. However, the Visa Office endeavours to have applications of this nature processed earlier than this, if possible. To be fair to all applicants, applications are processed in order by date received by the Visa Office.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility ([inisoireachtasmail@justice.ie](mailto:inisoireachtasmail@justice.ie)), which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

*Question No. 922 answered with Question No. 916.*

### An Garda Síochána

923. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Justice the number of gardaí stationed across the Tipperary division in each of the years since 2015 to date. [42607/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the general management and administration of the Garda organisation under the Garda Síochána Act 2005. This includes the deployment of members of An Garda Síochána throughout the State. As Minister, I have no role in these inde-

pendent functions.

I am assured, however, that Garda management keeps this distribution of resources under continual review in the context of policing priorities and crime trends, to ensure their optimum use. I am further advised that it is a matter for the Divisional Chief Superintendent to determine the optimum distribution of duties among the personnel available to him or her, having regard to the profile of each area within the Division and its specific needs.

An Garda Síochána has been allocated an unprecedented budget of €1.952 billion for 2021. This level of funding is enabling sustained, ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff. As a result, Garda numbers are now approximately 14,500 Garda members and over 3,000 Garda staff nationwide.

For the Deputy's information, the tables appended to this answer contain the breakdown of Garda members attached to the Tipperary Division from 2015 to August 2021, the latest date for which figures are available.

Detailed information in relation to the Garda strength of each Garda Division by District, Station and Rank is available on my Department's website. This information is updated every month with the latest data provided by An Garda Síochána. The information can be found at the following link:

[www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/An\\_Garda\\_Siochana\\_facts\\_and\\_figures](http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/An_Garda_Siochana_facts_and_figures)

[<a href="http://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq923-09-09-21\_en.xlsx">table</a>]

### **An Garda Síochána**

924. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Justice if there is an optimal ratio of Garda personnel per member of the public; if Garda figures are based upon population or geographic area; and the way the number of gardaí currently serving compares to the optimum number. [42608/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Government is committed to ensuring a strong and visible police presence throughout the country in order to maintain and strengthen community engagement, provide reassurance to citizens and to deter crime.

As the Deputy will appreciate, the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the distribution of Garda personnel and resources. As Minister, I have no direct role in these matters. Garda management keeps this distribution of resources under review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities, to ensure their optimum use.

I am advised by the Garda authorities that when consideration is given to the allocation of resources and in facilitating transfers of personnel to/from any Division, account is given to commitments and undertakings outlined in the Annual Policing Plan. In the context of the requirements of all Garda Divisions nationwide, the following factors are also accounted for: local and national crime trends and workloads; policing arrangements and operational strategies; minimum establishment statistics; local population and trends, geographical area and size; transfer applications, including welfare / personnel issues and concerns.

To ensure the continued level of delivery of policing services within Garda Divisions, local and senior Garda management are also consulted during the allocation of personnel and are

responsible for the specific deployment / assignment of duties being undertaken at Divisional level. The situation remains closely monitored by the Garda Senior Leadership Team, particularly in view of commitments to the continued roll-out of the Operating Model of policing at Divisional level to ensure optimum use of all Garda Resources in providing the best possible Garda service to the community.

### An Garda Síochána

925. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Justice the number of functioning Garda stations in County Tipperary in each year since 2015. [42609/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As the Deputy will be aware, under the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management of the Garda Estate. Further, the programme of replacement and refurbishment of Garda accommodation is progressed by the Garda authorities working in close cooperation with the Office of Public Works (OPW), which has the responsibility for the provision and maintenance of Garda accommodation. As Minister, I have no direct role in these matters.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that there are thirty-seven Garda Stations in the Tipperary Division, a figure which has remained constant since 2015. The following table, comprising information provided to me by the Garda authorities, outlines the breakdown of Garda Stations in the Tipperary division.

-		Tipperary Garda Stations (2015-2021)
Ardfinnan	Cloughjordan	Nenagh
Ballyingarry North	Dolla	Newport
Ballyingarry South	Emly	Portroe
Ballyporeen	Fethard	Roscrea
Bansha	Golden	Shevry*
Borrisokane	Holycross	Templederry*
Borrisoleigh	Kilenaule	Templemore
Cahir	Kilsheelan	Templetuohy
Cappawhite	Littleton	Thurles
Carrick-on-Suir	Lorrha	Tipperary
Cashel	Moneygall	Toomevara
Clogheen	Moyne*	
Clonmel	Mullinahone	

I am advised by the Garda authorities that it should be noted that while there are 37 stations attached to the Division, owing to the requirement for significant and large scale remedial works in Shevry, Moyne and Templederry, these three premises over the period 2015 to date have been deemed not suitable to function as Garda Stations.

### Drug Dealing

926. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Justice her views on the practice of drug dealers enticing young people into using illegal drugs by initially providing them with free narcotics; and the actions that are being taken to tackle this. [42610/21]

927. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Justice the measures being taken to tackle the forceful collection of drug debts accrued through the drug trade; her views on the way criminals are targeting parents to pay these debts; and if instances of this kind of criminality are on the increase. [42611/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 927 and 926 together.

As the Deputy will be aware, proactively tackling all forms of drug crime is a priority for the Government and for An Garda Síochána.

The Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau (GNDOCB) is having significant success in disrupting the supply of illicit drugs by organised crime groups. Its work is supported by Divisional Drugs Units nationwide and by all Gardaí working in local communities, while working closely with international law enforcement partners.

The National Drugs Strategy, “Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery - a health led response to drug and alcohol use in Ireland 2017-2025 “, is unique among national drugs strategies across EU Member States in recognising the need to address drug-related debt intimidation at a community level.

The Programme for Government, *Our Shared Future* , includes a commitment to support the Drug-Related Intimidation Reporting Programme. The programme, which was developed by An Garda Síochána in partnership with the National Family Support Network (NFSN), responds to the needs of drug users and family members who may be subject to the threat of drug related intimidation, has been implemented on a national level since 2013.

An Garda Síochána regard drug-related intimidation as a hugely serious issue which impacts significantly on communities throughout Ireland. An Garda Síochána advise people to seek help and support from their local Gardaí, even where a person has felt compelled to pay money to those who engage in drug related intimidation.

In dealing with any complaint of drug related intimidation, or advice sought in relation to this issue, An Garda Síochána have the utmost regard to the safety and most effective means to afford the person or family subject to the threat the best level of security, advice and support. Confidentiality and security of the persons concerned are paramount for An Garda Síochána when dealing with reports under the programme.

An Garda Síochána deals with drug related intimidation in a confidential and secure manner. Insofar as possible, An Garda Síochána offers confidentiality and provides practical personal security and safety information and advice in relation to particular threats or instances of intimidation, along with information on appropriate drug support services for the individual in the family who is accruing drug debts, while also providing information regarding the process involved in making a formal complaint.

The Deputy will also be aware of the new Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027. This strategy includes a commitment to develop the work of the Garda Youth Diversion Projects (GYDPs) to include targeted work with ‘harder-to-reach’ young people. This includes young people heavily involved in crime and anti-social behaviour, for whom there are little supports and interventions available in practice, unless they are before the courts, in which case they may be under the supervision of the Probation Service. The strategy also prioritises early intervention work, including with younger children who are assessed as being at serious risk. Both of these cohorts may include children at risk of recruitment by crime gangs.

The development of this work within the GYDP network will be supported by the Research

Evidence into Policy, Programmes and Practice (REPPP) project at the School of Law in the University of Limerick (UL). The REPPP project has led on the production of the “Greentown Report”, which studied the influence of criminal networks on children in Ireland, and was published in December 2016. The REPPP project is a strategic research partnership between UL and the Department of Justice.

The Greentown Report identifies crime networks as a separate and plausible risk factor underlying criminal offending by certain children. It outlines how the influence of criminal networks increases the level of offending by a small number of children and entraps them in offending situations.

The Greentown Report recommended the design of a programme to include interventions with children and their families to help them withstand the influence of criminal networks. The REPPP project team implemented a bespoke process to produce a model for an Irish evidence-informed intervention programme. This new “Greentown Programme” has been designed with the input of leading international expertise on crime and criminal networks, together with Irish scientific, policy and practice expertise in child protection and welfare, drugs and community development. The programme is managed jointly between my Department, An Garda Síochána and the University of Limerick.

Pilot applications of the Greentown programme, developed by the REPPP project, commenced in two locations in 2020 and will run for three years. The learning from these pilots will then be incorporated into mainstream GYDP practice. This specially designed intervention programme was developed with international expert advice, to tackle coercive control of children by criminal groups which entraps them in offending situations. Funds are already available for the initial pilots from the Dormant Accounts Funds, with a total of €4.2m allocated over three years.

The implementation of the Greentown pilot programme is part of the strategic objectives of the Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027. This implementation process began with the establishment of the Governance and Strategy Group, and the Youth Justice Oversight Group. Both groups are chaired by the Department of Justice, which will provide oversight arrangements for youth justice Initiatives, including the Greentown pilots, to ensure that there is a cohesive response in practice to the needs of particular cohorts of children and particular communities.

*Question No. 927 answered with Question No. 926.*

### **Prison Service**

928. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Justice the situation regarding the calculation of pension entitlements for prison officers who joined the service since June 1995 and how their pension is integrated with the State social welfare pension; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42632/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** I am advised that the principal terms and conditions of employment with regard to revised salary scales and revised superannuation arrangements of Civil Servants hired between 6th April 1995 and 31st December 2012 are laid down in Department of Finance Circular 06/1995: Revised social insurance status and conditions of service of certain civil servants.

Civil Servants employed from January 2013 are members of what is known as the Single Scheme. This is a defined contribution scheme and its operation is governed by the Public Service Pensions (Single Scheme and Other Provisions) Act 2012.

I am further advised that all Civil and Public Servants hired on or after 6th April 1995 are in full PRSI class and, subject to certain conditions, are eligible to claim the State Pension (Contributory). In recognition of that fact the relevant pension scheme is integrated, which means that the pension benefits – as well as the member’s pension contribution rate – take into account the State Pension benefits that may payable to the individual.

The Deputy may wish to note that the terms and conditions applicable to the pension entitlements of civil servants of any civil/public service pension scheme are a matter in the first instance for the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER).

*Question No. 929 answered with Question No. 916.*

### **Immigration Status**

930. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Justice if the case of a person (details supplied) will be examined. [42688/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** I can confirm to the Deputy that residence in Ireland together as a married couple for three or more years that includes time prior to the citizen spouse having been granted Irish citizenship does count towards the three year minimum period.

All applications are assessed in accordance with the provisions of the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956, as amended. Further details on the application process, along with the relevant application form, is available at: [www.irishimmigration.ie](http://www.irishimmigration.ie).

*Question No. 931 answered with Question No. 881.*

### **Flexible Work Practices**

932. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Justice the steps being taken to facilitate remote working within her Department in particular to encourage remote working for those who live in the regions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42711/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Departments and Offices are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

The proposed Blended Working Framework paper sets out a number of core principles to apply to blended working across the Civil Service post-COVID. Key to all this is the duty of Departments to deliver a quality service to Government, the Oireachtas and the public with flexibility and agility. There is recognition also of a need to create opportunities for people to balance their working and personal lives more effectively where possible.

Similar to our colleagues across the Civil Service, the Department of Justice has commenced work on developing its own blended working policy and arrangements, which take into account our specific business needs and requirements, while remaining grounded in the Civil Service Framework. Blended working arrangements are expected to be implemented by March 2022.

In the interim, the Department will begin the process of transitioning those staff who have been working remotely back to the workplace the 20th of September 2021. This transition phase will also help to inform future blended working policies and practice. All transition arrangements remain subject to change and are dependent on the public health advice in place during that time.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

933. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice the way in which her Department and public bodies and agencies under her remit are accommodating requests for persons to work from home. [42761/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As the Deputy will be aware, all Government Departments, Agencies and Offices are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

The proposed Blended Working Framework paper sets out a number of core principles to apply to blended working across the Civil Service post-COVID. Key to all this is the duty of Departments to deliver a quality service to Government, the Oireachtas and the public with flexibility and agility. There is recognition also of a need to create opportunities for people to balance their working and personal lives more effectively where possible.

My Department has commenced work on developing its own blended working policy and arrangements, which take into account our specific business needs and requirements, while remaining grounded in the Civil Service Framework. Blended working arrangements are expected to be implemented by March 2022.

In the interim, my Department will begin the process of reintroducing staff safely to the office environment, with preparations underway to start transitioning from 20 September to facilitate teams working together in the office one day a week. This transition phase will also help to inform future blended working policies and practice. All transition arrangements remain subject to change and are dependent on the public health advice in place during that time.

The Deputy will appreciate that many of the bodies and agencies under my Department's remit provide frontline services and have been committed to maintaining these essential services to the public throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The organisations facilitate remote working where possible in accordance with the public health advice where operational and business needs allow but obviously this is not possible for frontline staff in agencies such as An Garda Síochána, the Irish Prison Service, Forensic Science Ireland and others. I can assure the Deputy that future blended working arrangements will take operational requirements into account and will be in line with Government policy and public health guidelines.

### **Naturalisation Applications**

934. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice that reforms of the naturalisation process permit applications from persons with pending applications under section 3 or Deportation Orders, persons resident in the State for less than four years, and persons who have been

undocumented for less than four years. [42792/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is governed by the provisions of the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956, as amended. All applications for a certificate of naturalisation are processed and assessed individually in line with the eligibility criteria set out under the Act. A determination on whether an applicant satisfies the statutory criteria attendant to naturalisation, can only be made after an application is received.

The Act requires that, any person, prior to making an application for naturalisation, has five years reckonable residence in the State, except for spouses of Irish nationals where the requirement is three years. In both cases, the final 12 months must be continuous residence in the State with up to six weeks absence currently allowed to facilitate foreign travel for business, family or holiday purposes. In June, when announcing the publication of the General Scheme of the Courts and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2021, I confirmed that the continuous residence requirement will be amended to allow for total absences of up to 70 days from the State in the year preceding the citizenship application being made. Up to a further 30 days may also be allowed where necessitated by exceptional circumstances.

The Programme for Government contains a commitment to bring forward a regularisation scheme within 18 months of the formation of the Government, to create new pathways for long-term undocumented people and their dependents. Applicants will need to meet specific criteria and these will be formed with a clear consideration of Ireland's European Union and Common Travel Area commitments. The formulation of criteria is guided by research, including the learning from previous regularisation schemes, such as the 2018 Student Scheme. Schemes operated by other EU Member States are also being considered in its development.

My Department is now working to finalise the details for the Scheme, including eligibility considerations and qualifying criteria, with a view to bringing a proposal to Government shortly to allow for the launch of the Scheme before the end of this year.

### **Human Trafficking**

935. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice if she will provide a response to the Republic of Ireland being classified as Tier 2 Watchlist of the Trafficking in Persons Report of the United States of America Department of State Trafficking in Persons Report June 2021. [42793/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** Human trafficking is a heinous crime based on deception and exploitation of vulnerable people. Combatting it is, and will continue to be, a priority for this Government and over the past year we have introduced significant measures to combat trafficking, to create a more victim-centred approach to identifying and supporting victims and to raise awareness and provide training.

While it was very disappointing that the US State Department did not acknowledge the significant progress made by Ireland over the past 12 months as sufficient to upgrade our ranking in the latest 'Trafficking in Persons' Report, I am confident that the work we are doing should be reflected in the next TiPs report and that Ireland's ranking should be upgraded accordingly.

I note that a number of key areas identified in the latest TiPs Report reflect the ongoing work that is, in some cases, already well-advanced, including:

- The recent approval by Government to revise the National Referral Mechanism to make it

easier for victims of trafficking to come forward, be identified and access advice, accommodation and support;

- The drafting of a new National Action Plan on Human Trafficking;
- The development of training, through NGOs, targeting front line staff in industries such as hospitality, airline and shipping who may come into contact with trafficked persons;
- The work being undertaken to provide dedicated accommodation for female victims of sexual exploitation;
- The improvements being made to the Criminal Justice System to support victims through the implementation of Supporting A Victims Journey;
- The running of a new awareness raising campaign in partnership with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) to build on the success of previous campaigns;
- An increase in funding for supporting victims of crime generally and increased funding dedicated specifically to supporting victims of trafficking.

The latest report also highlighted that at the time of drafting there were no convictions for Human Trafficking in Ireland. In this regard it is important to highlight the significance of the recent convictions for human trafficking handed down by the Courts and to acknowledge the dedication of An Garda Síochána in investigating and tackling this hideous crime.

It was concerning that one of the factors given weight in this latest report was the continued reliance on an assessment made in an earlier TiPs report in relation to the fishing industry. This assessment was fully investigated by An Garda Síochána and no evidence was found to support the allegations of widespread human trafficking in the fishing industry. It is unclear why the State Department chose to place weight on one voice and not to take account of the balance of stakeholder assessment – including assessment by NGOs active in Ireland in tackling human trafficking – that these accusations are without foundation.

The allegations in that regard should be assessed also in the light of the High Court judgement in the case *International Transport Workers' Federation v the Minister for Justice and Equality* [2018 No. 5398 P] which referred, in refusing an application for an injunction on behalf of the International Transport Federation, *inter alia*, to

‘the extent of reliance by the plaintiff on speculation and the reports of others without applying due process like procedures to those accounts’.

As the Deputy will be aware, Ireland has strong separation of powers and the courts are independent of Government. A High Court judgment cannot be dismissed as an expression of opinion amongst potentially many others, but – unless overturned on appeal – is a conclusive finding of law or fact.

I am hopeful that the State Department will look at this particular issue more objectively when assessing Ireland’s ranking for the next TiPs Report.

*Question No. 936 answered with Question No. 900.*

### **International Protection**

937. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice if she will ensure that interna-

tional protection is provided to Afghan protection applicants currently in Ireland through an expedited process. [42797/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** My Department is currently reviewing all international protection applications on hand from Afghan nationals with a view to expediting their progress, in line with updated advices provided by UNHCR in recent weeks.

International protection applications from Afghan nationals are already prioritised, as agreed with UNHCR. In 2021 (to end July), there have been 82 applications from people providing Afghanistan as their country of origin at the time of application.

In general, the scheduling of interviews by the International Protection Office (IPO) of my Department is done in accordance with the prioritisation list agreed with the UNHCR and published on the IPO website.

Under the International Protection Act 2015, each application is assessed individually on its merits. Generally, all applicants for international protection are carefully interviewed and their cases are individually assessed by experienced caseworkers. The circumstances of each individual case is assessed having regard to both the subjective elements (the applicant's own account or personal history) and objective elements (up-to-date information on the applicant's country or place of origin).

Supporting documentation submitted by applicants is also taken into account. Information on an applicant's country of origin is obtained from a variety of legitimate sources such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Amnesty International and other NGOs, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), the US State Department and the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board.

### **Family Reunification**

938. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice if she will fast-track family reunion applications and broaden the criteria for Afghan refugees in the country especially those with outstanding family reunification applications. [42798/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** In response to the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, my Department is currently focused on processing family reunification applications for Afghan family members of Irish citizens and Afghan nationals living in Ireland.

One hundred and four Afghan family members have been granted family reunification so far this year and applications in respect of a further 64 people are being actively processed.

A person can apply for family reunification under the International Protection Act 2015 if they have been granted a declaration as a Convention Refugee, are a beneficiary of Subsidiary Protection or if they have been granted Programme Refugee status. Applications for Family Reunification under the 2015 Act can be made to my Department by email to FRU\_IPA@justice.ie or in hard copy to Family Reunification Unit, Department of Justice, 13-14 Burgh Quay, Dublin 2.

Under Section 56 of the 2015 Act, the following family members are eligible for family reunification:

- Spouse - the marriage must have subsisted on the date the application for international protection in the State was lodged;

- Civil Partner- the civil partnership must have subsisted on the date of the application for international protection in the State was lodged;

- Parent(s) and their children (under 18 and unmarried) if the sponsor was under 18 and unmarried on the date the application for family reunification in the State was lodged; and

- A child of the sponsor, who is under the age of 18 and unmarried when the sponsor made an application for family reunification in the State.

Full details on the application process can be found on my Department's website at: [www.irishimmigration.ie/coming-to-join-family-in-ireland/family-reunification-of-international-protection-holders/](http://www.irishimmigration.ie/coming-to-join-family-in-ireland/family-reunification-of-international-protection-holders/).

Anyone who is not eligible to make an application under the 2015 Act, may wish to consider making an application for a visa to join a family member already living in Ireland. Eligible family members are generally dependent family including spouses, civil partners and children under the age of 18. Detailed information is available at: [www.irishimmigration.ie/coming-to-join-family-in-ireland/](http://www.irishimmigration.ie/coming-to-join-family-in-ireland/).

### **International Protection**

939. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice if she will halt refusals for leave to land and access to the international protection process for Afghan people. [42799/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** Each person who has been refused leave to land in the State is assessed on their own merits, taking all relevant information into consideration at that time. If at any point during the refusal of leave to land process a person claims asylum or demonstrates that they are in need of protection they will be admitted to the international protection process.

Interpretation facilities are available as required. In all cases, return of persons refused leave to land (who do not make an international protection application) are conducted in accordance with the law, with the vast majority of such returns being made to other EU Member States. Arrangements are made by the Garda National Immigration Bureau to return such persons to their point of embarkation at the earliest opportunity.

My Department is currently reviewing all international protection applications on hand from Afghan nationals with a view to expediting their progress, in line with updated advices provided by UNHCR in recent weeks.

### **Coroners Service**

940. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Justice the number of staff employed in each coroner's court; and the average number of deaths dealt with in the past five years in tabular form. [42822/21]

941. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Justice the number of vacant positions in each coroner's court and the plans in place to fill any such vacancies. [42823/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 940 and 941 together.

As the Deputy will be aware, coroners are independent quasi-judicial officials exercising their functions under the law, the Coroners Act 1962 as amended. Neither I nor my Department have any role in the conduct of the functions by coroners. The coroners' core function is to investigate deaths required to be reported to him or her by law, including sudden and unexplained deaths so that a final death certificate can be issued.

There are coroners working in all 38 coronial districts. The names of coroners, their deputies and the coronial districts they act in are published and available on the website [www.coroners.ie](http://www.coroners.ie). There are no current vacancies for coroners in any district.

Coroners report on their activities each year and the statistics in regard to deaths reported, post-mortem examinations directed and inquests held are published by my Department. The details up to 2020 are available on [www.coroners.ie](http://www.coroners.ie).

*Question No. 941 answered with Question No. 940.*

### **Citizenship Applications**

942. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of an application for citizenship in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42835/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** The application for a certificate of naturalisation from the person referred to by the Deputy is currently being processed with a view to establishing whether the applicant meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision as expeditiously as possible.

The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements not only within the State but also at European Union level and it is important that appropriate procedures are in place to preserve the integrity of the process.

It is recognised that all applicants for citizenship would wish to have a decision on their application without delay. However, the nature of the naturalisation process is such that, for a broad range of reasons, some cases will take longer than others to process. In some instances, completing the necessary checks can take a considerable period of time.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility at: [INISOireachtasMail@justice.ie](mailto:INISOireachtasMail@justice.ie), which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Question process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in the cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

### **Government Communications**

943. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Justice if her Ministerial phones have been hacked or attempted to be hacked during the term of office. [42929/21]

944. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Justice if she has ever used her personal phones for Government business; and if so, if the personal phones have been hacked during her term of office. [42947/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 943 and 944 together.

I am not aware of any attempt to hack my phone.

*Question No. 944 answered with Question No. 943.*

### Freedom of Information

945. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of freedom of information requests responded to by her Department in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; the number of responses that included documents related to text messages and other phone message communications such as messages sent through an application (details supplied) in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42969/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The total number of freedom of information requests responded to by my Department in the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021 is set out in tabular format below:

Year	Total
2016	591
2017	780
2018	853
2019	844
2020	797
2021 (YTD 31/08/2021)	561

In relation to the second part of the Deputy's question, it is not possible to provide the details and the number of responses that included documents related to text messages and other phone message communications without a manual examination of each individual response. Such an examination would require an inordinate and disproportionate amount of staff time and resources and could not be considered at this time.

### An Garda Síochána

946. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Justice if she will investigate with An Garda Síochána if it holds or collects data on reports from parents, schools or members of the public on child endangerment issues, such as attempted abductions, in or around schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42986/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I have requested the information sought by the Deputy from An Garda Síochána, but I have not received this information in time. I will write to the Deputy as soon as the information is to hand.

### Commissions of Investigation

947. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Justice the cost of each commission of investigation under the remit of her Department over the preceding decade. [42996/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As the Deputy may be aware, a detailed note is provided in my Department's appropriation account (Vote 24) each year of the cost of commissions and inquiries which are ongoing or have concluded and are still incurring cost.

The information requested by the Deputy is set out in tabular format below.

The cost for each commission of investigation either ongoing or concluded but still incurring costs to the end of June 2021 is as follows:

Commissions and Inquiries	Date established	Total cost to 30/6/2021€000	Additional Information
Smithwick Tribunal	2005	19,889	Concluded at the end of 2013 with remaining costs to be discharged with regard to one third party
Independent Review Mechanism and Section 42 Inquiries (Garda Síochána Act 2005)	2014	1,838	
Disclosures Tribunal	2017	13,025	
Independent Reporting Commission	2017	118	
Hickson Commission of Investigation	2018	1,392	
A Study on Familicide and Domestic Homicide Reviews	2019	468	
Shane O' Farrell – Scoping review of circumstances leading to his death	2019	269	

In addition, the following commissions and inquiries have concluded and the following costs are as reported in the Appropriation Account:

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq947-09-09-21\_en.docx">table</a>]

### Legislative Measures

948. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress made on plans to modernise the law on the administration of oaths in judicial and other proceedings; if she plans to remove religious references and religious-based oaths of office; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43023/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Articles 12.8, 31.4 and 34.5.1° of the Constitution respectively prescribe the wording of a declaration to be made by a person taking up office as President, as a member of the Council of State, and as a judge. The prescribed wording contains religious references: in each case the prescribed declaration includes a statement that the declaration is being made 'in the presence of Almighty God', while the declarations prescribed by Article 12.8 and by Article 34.5.1° also end with the words 'May God direct and sustain me.'

Any amendment to these provisions would require a referendum.

Within my own Department's areas of responsibility, the Civil Law and Criminal Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2020 introduced Statements of Truth as an alternative to the swear-

ing of an affidavit or statutory declaration as a means of submitting evidence or verifying documents in civil proceedings. The General Scheme of the Courts and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2021, published in June, has also provided for the introduction of Statements of Truth to replace swearing on a bible for affidavits or statutory declarations for electronic filing to a court.

### **Ministerial Appointments**

949. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Justice the number of formal and informal roles held by a person (details supplied) in the name of her Department or associated agency in the lifetime of this Government; when they were appointed to same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43040/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I wish to advise the Deputy that there is no record of the person referred to holding any roles in my Department or in any of the agencies, offices or bodies under its aegis.

### **Government Communications**

950. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if she and or her special advisers and or officials use or have used services (details supplied) to communicate in the past 18 months. [43076/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As the Deputy will be aware, with the move to remote working as a result of COVID-19, in line with Government guidelines, there has been an expansion in the availability and use of services which provide for modern and secure communications between individuals and teams.

My Department is no different in that respect from other large organisations with a need for secure communications and I can confirm that one of the services referred to by the Deputy is used on occasion by my Department.

Importantly however, I can confirm that the use of this or any other service does not interfere in any way with the obligation to maintain appropriate records of Department business in accordance with the statutory obligations set out in the National Archives and Freedom of Information Acts, which my Department fully adheres to.

I have not used the applications referred to by the Deputy to transact government business by text message.

### **Crime Prevention**

951. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Justice her plans to introduce a new criminal offence for pet abduction which would recognise that pets are valued as more than just property; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43181/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy James Browne):** Both Minister Humphreys and I are very conscious of the strong emotional attachment that many people have to their pets, and that the theft of a pet animal can be a traumatic experience.

As the Deputy will be aware, I previously introduced a Bill to enhance the place of companion animals in legislation. Work on this Bill is currently ongoing in my Department.

Minister McEntee and I also met with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine in December 2020 to discuss the issues of pet theft and animal welfare legislation. A collaborative approach was agreed to dealing with the issue. As the Deputy will be aware, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine has responsibility for all animal welfare issues.

The Deputy may wish to further note that my Department is kept apprised by An Garda Síochána on the issue of pet theft. Under the Criminal Justice (Theft and Fraud Offences) Act, the theft of an animal carries a maximum penalty of 10 years imprisonment on conviction. If the animal was taken from a person's property the crime becomes burglary and attracts a potential maximum of up to 14 years imprisonment. These are significant sentences by any measure.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda Commissioner is responsible under the Garda Síochána Act for the administration and management of An Garda Síochána, including all operational policing decisions. This includes crime prevention initiatives and strategies.

With regard to measures aimed at preventing such thefts, I am informed by the Garda authorities that information has been disseminated to the Crime Prevention Officers' Network countrywide specifically dealing with the topic of dog thefts. The Garda National Crime Prevention Unit's advice on pet safety concurs with the advice from animal welfare groups and animal insurance companies about keeping animals safe.

Ongoing patrols throughout the country also act as a deterrent to mobile criminals and thereby help prevent criminal activity. Improved awareness of dog thefts among the community will ensure more vigilance within neighbourhood watch and community alert areas.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

952. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health if emigrating to a different country was classified as essential travel during Covid-19 travel restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42903/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** S.I. No. 29/2021 provided for domestic travel restrictions from 1 February 2021 and required persons not to leave their place of residence to go to an airport or port for the purpose of leaving the State without reasonable excuse. These included those persons who were no longer an ordinary resident in the State travelling to the airport or port to leave the State. These restrictions were lifted on 19th of July 2021.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

953. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health if he will report on the distinction of casinos, amusement arcades, play centres and leisure facilities as opposed to indoor dining venues with regard to being an indoor operator permitted to operate under the Covid-19 public health measures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41423/21]

1178. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the date on which he will allow children's soft play centres, snooker halls and bowling alleys to reopen in the context of public health guidelines in view of the fact that other hospitality venues such as licensed premises and restaurants are permitted to allow indoor patrons; and the rationale for keeping such facilities closed at this time in view of the fact that the State has achieved a high degree of

vaccination. [41997/21]

1267. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the expected timeframe for information on the reopening of indoor leisure facilities such as arcades, casinos, bingo and snooker halls; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42281/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 953, 1178 and 1267 together.

As outlined in *COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting*, which was announced by Government on 31 August, leisure facilities where patrons have defined areas which are pre-booked including bowling, snooker halls, indoor play centres and amusement arcades may reopen from 20 September. Capacity is limited to 100 people where all patrons are immune or accompanied minors. Where patrons have mixed immunity status, pods of up to 6 participants will be permitted with multiple pods permitted.

Based on the criteria of at or close to 90% of people 16 or over being fully vaccinated in the coming weeks and having regard to the incidence and behaviour of the disease at that time, from 22 October onwards, restrictions on high-risk activities, including casinos, will be lifted.

Since the onset of the pandemic, we have saved lives and limited the impact of the disease on society in Ireland due to the huge effort of people across the country. Thanks to the hard work of the Irish people and the progress of our vaccination programme, we are now entering a new phase in the management of the pandemic. As our approach to the management of COVID-19 transitions from population wide restrictions to guidance we must continue to practice basic preventative behaviours, including in relation to self-isolation and restricting movements when advised, observing good respiratory and hand hygiene, physical distancing and mask wearing when appropriate.

*COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting* can be found online: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/f5291-post-cabinet-statement-covid-19-reframing-the-challenge-continuing-our-recovery-and-reconnecting/>

### **Mental Health Services**

954. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health his plans to clear the backlog of waiting lists to see mental health therapists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41424/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Dental Services**

955. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the status of the dental treatment services scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41427/21]

1310. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 590 of 8 December 2020, the actions he has since taken to ensure that medical card patients are able to receive necessary and timely dental care; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42414/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 955 and 1310 together.

The Dental Treatment Services Scheme (DTSS) provides dental care, free of charge to medical card holders aged 16 and over. These services are provided by independent dental practitioners who have a contract with the HSE.

The approach to future oral health service provision will be aligned with Smile agus Sláinte, the National Oral Health Policy (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 of the DTSS, but recognise that it needs to be aligned with the new Policy. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the roll-out of the National Oral Health Policy to be delayed, and the proposed review of the DTSS contract to be deferred. Officials in my Department and from the HSE are currently engaging with the Irish Dental Association on matters relating to the provision of services under the DTSS.

### **Departmental Funding**

956. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the current and future funding streams that will be available for addiction services specifically funding that will be made available to organisations (details supplied); the timeframe for which funding will be available; the criteria linked to that funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41428/21]

1266. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the current funding available to an organisation (details supplied); the future funding that may be made available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42280/21]

1269. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the current funding available to a group (details supplied); the future funding that may be made available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42283/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 956, 1266 and 1269 together.

The National Drug Strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, recognises the role of families affected by drug use in contributing to the planning, design and delivery of effective addiction services.

In Budget 2021, I secured €280,000 in additional funding to support family services. This funding will be used to develop and broaden the range of peer-led, mutual aid and family support programmes in accordance with best practice, in line with action 2.1.16 of the National Drugs Strategy.

The development of family support services is listed as a drug and alcohol priority in the HSE National Service Plan for 2021. It is intended that the HSE will use this additional funding to develop coordinated family support programmes in the following four areas this year:

- Dublin North Inner City,
- Cork/Kerry,
- Louth and Meath

- Donegal.

It is anticipated that each initiative will be allocated €70,000. I am happy to report that the drawdown of the funding for these services has been approved by the Department and the funding is now available to the HSE for allocation to community healthcare organisations.

I am aware of the interest in the allocation of this funding in Louth/Meath and the other three regions by organisations and or groups representing families.

I would encourage such groups to engage with the HSE regarding the allocation of this funding in their region.

## Health Services

957. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health if he will delay the current situation in relation to cancer care; the status of any Covid-19 delays to services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41429/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The National Action Plan on Covid-19 identified the continued provision of cancer care as a priority. Cancer services continue to operate in line with guidance issued by the HSE's National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP).

The NCCP is continuing to closely monitor trends in numbers coming forward to diagnostic services, and the level of attendances for appointments for treatment. GP e-referrals to Rapid Access Clinics (RACs) from January to July stand at 117% of the activity in the corresponding period in 2019. New attendances at RACs from January to June 2021 (24,702) is at 96% of 2019 activity (25,791).

Medical and radiation and oncology services are continuing, utilising the safeguards of social distancing and infection prevention & control measures built up in the past year. The number of patients receiving chemotherapy from January to April 2021 was at approximately 90% of 2019 activity, while radiation oncology was operating at 81% of 2019 activity.

Urgent surgery has been prioritised and there has been an emphasis on maintaining safe patient pathways in this regard. For 2021, surgery numbers up to end of May were 64% of 2019 levels. However, this figure does not include surgeries involving public patients that were undertaken in private hospitals, so the overall figure is likely to be higher.

We would point out that data for 2021 may be subject to some change due to on-going validation processes. The availability of data has also been impacted by the ransomware attack in May this year.

Funding of €12m has been allocated this year for the restoration of cancer services to 95% of 2019 (pre-Covid) levels. This funding is being used to support hospitals in addressing backlogs, extending clinic times, providing additional clinics, increasing diagnostic capacity and providing locum/temporary support. It is also supporting virtual clinics and more accurate triage, and facilitating infrastructure and minor equipment purchases to increase capacity across RACs and surgical oncology, medical oncology and radiation oncology services.

In addition, as part of Budget 2021, an extra €20m has been allocated for the continued implementation of the National Cancer Strategy this year. This funding is being used to facilitate developments across prevention, diagnosis, treatment and patient supports.

**Covid-19 Pandemic**

958. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health if he will initiate an immediate public enquiry into the Covid-19 deaths in nursing homes during the pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41430/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** 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 Panel was established, on foot of a NPHEP 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, although these have been affected by the recent cyberattack on the health system. Many of the short- and medium-term recommendations have already been implemented.

Work to progress the recommendations of the Nursing Home 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.

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 is being 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 has rapidly increased 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.

The Government is 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.

### **Home Care Packages**

959. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health his plans to add additional funding to home support packages. [41431/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** Home supports enable older people to remain in their own homes and communities, as well as facilitating timely discharge from hospital. We have made improved access to home support services a priority. In 2021 an additional investment of €150 million has been made available to fund over 24.2 million hours of home support and to support the roll out of the interRAI standard assessment tool and the establishment of a National Home Support Office. This is 5 million hours more than the 2020 target.

The level of funding available in 2022 and the quantum of services to be provided by the HSE, including home support will be considered as part of the national Estimates and budgetary process and National Service Planning.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

960. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the status in relation to antigen testing and the expert panel group; the pilot programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41432/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I have established an Expert Advisory Group on Rapid Testing, chaired by Professor Mary Horgan, Consultant in Infectious Diseases at Cork University Hospital and President of the Royal College of Physicians.

The group will support and advise government departments, who are responsible for progressing pilots and the rollout of rapid tests in their respective sectors. It will also be responsible for communicating to the general public.

The membership of the group and its terms of reference are available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/e2767-minister-donnelly-establishes-expert-advisory-group-on-rapid-testing/>

Minutes of the Groups meetings are available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/8b585-minutes-and-agendas-from-meetings-of-the-rapid-testing-expert-advisory-group/>

### **Cannabis for Medicinal Use**

961. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the status of the medical cannabis access programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41433/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly as soon as possible.

## **Health Service Executive**

962. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the status of the situation facing a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41434/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Disease Management**

963. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health his plans to implement the National Hepatitis C Treatment Programmes into the Irish Prison Service as is set out in the HSE National Service Plan for 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41435/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The HSE established a National Hepatitis C Treatment Programme (NHCTP) in 2015 and began the process of providing treatment for Hepatitis C using Directly Acting Antivirals to patients prioritised according to clinical need.

The NHCTP is continuing to strengthen the seek and treat model in order to continue to reach as many people as possible who are in need of testing and treatment.

The NHCTP has provided funding for a Hepatitis C Nurse to support St. James's Hospital's outreach to the Irish Prison Service. A new HSE Hepatitis C pilot project within Cork Prison is due to commence in Quarter 3 of 2021.

### **Hepatitis C Incidence**

964. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if Ireland is still on target to reach the World Health Organisation goal of eliminating hepatitis C by 2030; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41436/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The HSE established a National Hepatitis C Treatment Programme (NHCTP) in 2015 and began the process of providing treatment for Hepatitis C using Directly Acting Antivirals (DAA's) to patients prioritised according to clinical need. The HSE in its National Service Plans has committed to the continued implementation of a multi annual public health plan for the therapeutic treatment of hepatitis C. The Programme is allocated funding of €25m each year by my Department.

The NHCTP aims to make hepatitis C a rare disease in Ireland by 2026 and to achieve the World Health Organisation goal of eliminating hepatitis C by 2030. Achieving this will require identification and treatment of the majority of chronically infected individuals in the community. In this regard, the NHCTP are currently engaged in a formal epidemiological study to determine prevalence and to facilitate informed decisions regarding screening.

With the outbreak of COVID-19, hepatitis C clinics were significantly impacted. However, clinics are returning to normal and the NHCTP is confident that the Programme is on target to make hepatitis C a rare disease in Ireland by 2026, and in alignment with the WHO goal, to fully eliminate the disease in Ireland by 2030. To ensure that these targets are met, the NHCTP has implemented the following:

1. The Community Prescribing Project

2. The Irish Prison Service Treatment Programme
3. Extending the Seek and Treat Approach to people who are non-methadone dependant

The National Hepatitis C Treatment Programme Strategy 2020-2026 is currently under consideration by the Department. This refreshed strategy will set a clear direction for the further expansion of the programme.

### **Cannabis for Medicinal Use**

965. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide an update on the payment system to be implemented further to his recent statement on the refund system for eligible patients who obtain their prescribed cannabis-based products from the Netherlands; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41438/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The HSE have advised that a patient who has a valid medical prescription for medical cannabis, whose treating clinician holds a Ministerial licence under the Misuse of Drugs Act and who has sourced a cannabis-based product, may submit an application to the HSE Corporate Pharmaceutical Unit in the Primary Care Reimbursement Service (PCRS) for reimbursement.

The HSE has advised that in the previous situations where it considered reimbursement support appropriate, the following steps were completed:

- The patient's consultant is satisfied that all therapeutic options have been exhausted and is prepared to accept the responsibility for monitoring the patient's response to the cannabis product.

- A prescriber has successfully applied to the Minister for a Ministerial license.

- The consultant completes an Individual Reimbursement Form, setting out the therapeutic benefit for the patient. It is important that this is completed in sufficient detail for therapeutic benefit to be demonstrated.

- The Individual Reimbursement Form is considered by the Medicines Management Programme (MMP).

- On review of the documentation, the MMP makes a recommendation for or against reimbursement support for the patient to the HSE, under the patient's eligibility, and informs the PCRS of that recommendation.

- If approval is given, the PCRS, when authorised to proceed, will make the necessary arrangements to cover the costs involved for the patient.

The contact details for the CPU as follows:

Corporate Pharmaceutical Unit,  
HSE, Primary Care Reimbursement Service,  
Exit 5, M50,  
Finglas,  
Dublin 11.

D11XKF3

Phone No: 01 8915725

Fax No: 01 8915757

Email Address: CPU@hse.ie

### **Eating Disorders**

966. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health his plans in regard to the challenges that face persons suffering from eating disorders particularly in relation to the pressures on acute and day services; his further plans to address these pressures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41439/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Mental Health Services**

967. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the number of vacant positions to be filled in CHO8 mental health services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41440/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

968. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) can expect a hospital appointment. [41444/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

969. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) can expect a hospital appointment. [41445/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its

behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

970. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide clarification regarding weddings (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41449/21]

972. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health if it is proposed to increase the numbers permitted to attend wedding ceremonies; if it is intended that the Health Amendment (No. 2) Act 2021 will apply to wedding receptions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41451/21]

1001. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health the restrictions that will be proposed or in place for weddings over the next few months given that couples planning weddings need details to plan around for the day and are concerned about postponing weddings again. [41524/21]

1002. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Health the number of guests to be allowed at a wedding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41526/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 970, 972, 1001 and 1002 together.

As outlined in *COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting*, which was announced by Government on 31 August, there will be no change to the current limit of 100 guests at weddings before 22 October. Guidance on weddings can be found here: <https://failtecdn.azureedge.net/failteireland/Guidelines-for-Re-opening-Hotels-and-Guesthouses.pdf>

Based on the criteria of at or close to 90% of people 16 or over being fully vaccinated in the coming weeks and having regard to the incidence and behaviour of the disease at that time, from 22 October onwards, restrictions will be lifted including restrictions on religious and civil ceremonies and limits on numbers at indoor and outdoor events and activities.

Since the onset of the pandemic, we have saved lives and limited the impact of the disease on society in Ireland due to the huge effort of people across the country. Thanks to the hard work of the Irish people and the progress of our vaccination programme, we are now entering a new phase in the management of the pandemic. As our approach to the management of COVID-19 transitions from population wide restrictions to guidance we must continue to practice basic preventative behaviours, including in relation to self-isolation and restricting movements when advised, observing good respiratory and hand hygiene, physical distancing and mask wearing when appropriate.

*COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting* can be found online: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/f5291-post-cabinet-statement-covid-19-reframing-the-challenge-continuing-our-recovery-and-reconnecting/>

## **Medical Research and Training**

971. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the location a copy of the rules and regulations applicable to higher specialist training in public health medicine can be obtained; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41450/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 972 answered with Question No. 970.*

## **Ambulance Service**

973. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding the waiting times for ambulances (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41474/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

974. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Minister for Health the reason the Covid-19 funding for enhanced infection controls and staffing has been withdrawn from private nursing homes (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41475/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** The Government has provided extensive support to the Nursing Home Sector since the start of the pandemic. The Temporary Assistance Payment Scheme (TAPS) was established in April 2020 as a temporary, administrative measure to respond to the challenges being faced by the nursing home sector at the start of the pandemic. Up to €134m for the Scheme was made available for 2020 and 2021.

In broad terms, the Scheme has now substantially fulfilled its temporary purpose of providing financial support to nursing homes and residents to address COVID-19 and therefore phased withdrawal of support is appropriate. Standard Assistance Payments continue to be processed for costs incurred up to 30th June 2021. After this, in recognition of the residual risk presented by the virus, Minister Donnelly and I have agreed to the continued availability of the outbreak assistance element of the Scheme until the end of this year. This will ensure that contingency is available in the event of an outbreak.

As the pandemic has continued, many further support measures for private and voluntary nursing homes have been made available through the Health Service Executive (HSE), including the provision of PPE on a no-cost basis, the implementation of serial testing, the support and engagement of COVID-19 response teams and public health teams, the temporary accommodation scheme for nursing home staff and further supports. Many of these supports will continue to be provided by the HSE for the foreseeable future.

At the time of the Scheme's inception, the unprecedented nature of the emerging pandemic meant that it was necessary to put such measures in place. There has been substantial support in place to assist nursing homes to build their resilience and ensure that they are fully informed

and prepared for continuing to manage COVID-19 and fulfil their legal obligation and duties to residents. The circumstances are now significantly changed, reflecting both the success of the vaccination programme along with the considerable opportunity for nursing homes, over the past 18 months with the various support measures, to learn and adapt their response to COVID-19. This is also the case for every health and non-health sector, and service providers across Ireland must similarly adapt their service model in line with the wider public health measures.

Nursing homes were prioritised for vaccination, and the vast majority of residents and staff have now been vaccinated. Thankfully, notwithstanding the current epidemiological situation generally and the risks posed by the delta variant, the substantial positive vaccine effect is being seen in nursing homes with low numbers of cases reported. This is a markedly different scenario compared to turn of the year. All the relevant health agencies including the Department will continue to closely monitor the current situation to respond to any changes in the risk profile that may arise. On the 27 July, I convened an interagency meeting with HIQA, the HSE and the Department to focus on the current situation and ongoing management of risk. The HSE and HIQA have confirmed that they continue to closely monitor the situation and that all the relevant supports, including the COVID-19 response teams, remain activated and engaged with nursing homes.

The vaccination programme and other public health measures support the minimisation of and control the impact of COVID-19, with COVID-19 vaccines effective at reducing the risk of hospitalisation or severe disease. The disease will nevertheless remain part of our lives for the foreseeable future, in a manner similar to other common viruses and infections. Good infection prevention control will continue be necessary in controlling the spread of such illnesses. This should be a matter of course in all healthcare settings, as it has always been, and is supported by regulation and standards. The Health Protection Surveillance Centre will continue to monitor COVID-19 alongside other such illnesses and update public health guidance accordingly. At a point where the vast majority of residents and staff are vaccinated, outbreaks have declined significantly and where learning and preparedness, including at provider level, has had the opportunity to evolve in a supported way, the TAPS as a temporary administrative measure has fulfilled its primary purpose, within the parameters of its sanction. This end date of the Scheme was announced in October 2020.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

975. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who contracted Covid-19 in a hospital setting on a monthly basis since 1 March 2021. [41476/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

976. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who tested positive for Covid-19 in a hospital setting during routine testing after admittance to hospital for a non-Covid-19 related illness or condition; if this figure will be provided by month; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41477/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

977. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons with Covid-19 in ICU in the State who are in ICU for a non-Covid-19 related illness. [41478/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

978. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who have tested positive for Covid-19 in the State through the use of walk-in testing centres for asymptomatic persons since the start of the pandemic. [41479/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

979. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health if persons who died from non-Covid-19 related illnesses but who had tested positive for Covid-19, although they were asymptomatic at the time of death, are included in the Covid-19 death figures of Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41480/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

980. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of cases or legal actions currently being taken against nursing homes or hospitals, other residential care facilities and-or the State by persons or groups of persons who allege that their loved ones died having contracted Covid-19 in the hospital, residential care or a nursing home setting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41481/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The State Claims Agency (SCA) has a statutory remit to manage personal injury claims, including claims in respect of clinical negligence, on behalf of Delegated State Authorities (DSA's) including the Health Service Executive.

I have been informed by the SCA that the information contained below was extracted from the National Incident Management System (NIMS) according to the criteria below:

- The explicit reference to "hospitals", "residential care" or "nursing homes" is interpreted as claims notified to the SCA against the HSE which relate to incidents occurring within a nursing home, hospital or a community health organisation location/unit .

- Claims arising could relate to the death of a service user or staff member.

The number of claims currently being taken against the HSE, notified to the SCA, which arise from the death of a family member as a result of contracting Covid-19 in a Nursing Home,

healthcare facility or hospital setting is 25. The 25 claims arise from the deaths of 25 different individuals.

### Health Services

981. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of lung cancer diagnoses in Ireland in each of the past ten years and to date in 2021. [41484/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services

982. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of breast cancer diagnoses in Ireland in each of the past ten years and to date in 2021. [41485/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services

983. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of bowel cancer diagnoses in Ireland in each of the past ten years and to date in 2021. [41486/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services

984. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of cervical cancer diagnoses in Ireland in each of the past ten years and to date in 2021. [41487/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services

985. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of ovarian cancer diagnoses in Ireland in each of the past ten years and to date in 2021. [41488/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The National Cancer Registry Ireland (NCRI) collects, classifies, records and stores information in relation to each newly diagnosed individual cancer patient, and in relation to each tumour that occurs.

NCRI advise that figures for 2019-2020 have not yet been fully validated. The figures available for the most recent NCRI annual statistical report (published Dec 2020) cover the period 2009-2018 and are as follows:

Diagnosis year	Ovarian Cancers
2009	350
2010	364
2011	355
2012	390
2013	357
2014	425
2015	416
2016	384
2017	400
2018	387

### Health Services

986. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of brain cancer diagnoses in Ireland in each of the past ten years and to date in 2021. [41489/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services

987. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of skin cancer diagnoses in Ireland in each of the past ten years and to date in 2021. [41490/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The National Cancer Registry Ireland (NCRI) collects, classifies, records and stores information in relation to each newly diagnosed individual cancer patient, and in relation to each tumour that occurs.

NCRI advise that figures for 2019-2020 have not yet been fully validated. The figures available for the most recent NCRI annual statistical report (published Dec 2020) cover the period 2009-2018 and are as follows:

Diagnosis year	all skin cancers	melanoma skin cancers	non-melanoma skin cancers
2009	8,749	776	7,973
2010	9,523	896	8,627
2011	10,241	895	9,346
2012	10,361	875	9,486
2013	10,899	1,006	9,893
2014	11,442	1,055	10,387
2015	11,850	1,133	10,717
2016	11,811	1,143	10,668
2017	12,464	1,117	11,347
2018	13,032	1,157	11,875

### Homeless Persons Supports

988. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health his views on the attempts by the HSE to shut down certain homeless soup runs in Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41491/21]

1137. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE plans to shut down existing soup runs in Dublin (details supplied); and if a plan is in place to feed homeless persons if these soup runs are forced to cease operating. [41844/21]

1268. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the supports that have been put in place to ensure volunteer-run soup kitchens such as groups (details supplied) can continue to provide essential services; the timeframe provided to this organisation to make any necessary changes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42282/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 988, 1137 and 1268 together.

All food businesses must comply with the requirements of food law that are relevant to the business they operate. Regulation (EC) No. 178 of 2002 provides the general framework for the operation of food safety law, and defines a food business as “any undertaking, whether for profit or not and whether public or private, carrying out any of the activities related to any stage of production, processing and distribution of food.” Therefore, operators distributing food to people who are homeless such as those referred to by the Deputies, are food businesses for the purposes of food safety law.

Food business operators are required by law to notify the HSE (or other FSAI Official Agencies as appropriate) of their intention to carry on a food business. The frequency of inspection of food businesses is based on the risk to public health, with risk being assessed on a number of criteria including the types of foods being produced, processed, and distributed, and the vulnerability of the consumers.

The primary responsibility of the HSE Environmental Health Service (EHS) is the protection of public health. It works under a service contract for the Food Safety Authority of Ireland to ensure the relevant food legislation is applied as necessary. This work is essential to ensure that food made available for people to eat is safe. Persons accessing homeless services are among the most vulnerable in our community and may be immunocompromised. There is, therefore, risk of serious illness as a result of any potential food borne infection.

The EHS supervises over 45,000 food businesses and endeavours to work with food business operators to encourage an understanding of the legal requirements and to support compliance with the minimum food safety standards regarding structure, operation, safety management systems and staff training and to ensure compliance with food law where non-compliances are found upon inspection.

I am advised by the HSE that the EHS has neither served, nor threatened to serve, a closure order on any voluntary street-based service distributing food to the homeless.

The coordination of services to people who are homeless, including the provision of accommodation and food, falls within the remit of the Department of Housing, the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive and the local authorities.

I recognise the value of voluntary organisations in providing food and other services to people who are homeless. I would encourage these organisations to engage with the relevant homeless authorities to ensure services are provided in accordance with food safety and other regulations.

## **Departmental Correspondence**

989. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health if he has received correspondence from a charity or organisation expressing concerns over a perceived increase in mental ill health or suicide rates since he took office; if so, the dates upon which he received such correspondence; the bodies he received such correspondence from; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41492/21]

990. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health if he has received correspondence from a consultant psychiatrist or college of psychiatry or general practitioner body or individual general practitioners expressing concerns over a perceived increase in mental ill health or suicide rates since he took office; if so, the dates upon which he received such correspondence; the persons or bodies he received same from; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41493/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 989 and 990 together.

The documentation requested will be provided directly to the Deputy.

*Question No. 990 answered with Question No. 989.*

### **Departmental Correspondence**

991. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health if he has received correspondence from general practitioners expressing concerns over a perceived increase or decrease in cancer diagnosis, late cancer diagnosis or missed cancer diagnosis as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic since he took office; if so, the dates upon which he received such correspondence; the persons he received the correspondence from; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41494/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Department of Health is not aware of correspondence from General Practitioners specifically relating to any perceived increase or decrease in cancer diagnoses, late cancer diagnoses or missed cancer diagnoses as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The National Action Plan on Covid-19 identified the continued provision of cancer care as a priority. Cancer services continue to operate in line with guidance issued by the HSE's National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP). The NCCP is continuing to closely monitor trends in numbers coming forward to diagnostic services, and the level of attendances for appointments for treatment. The total number of patients seen across all Rapid Access Clinics (RACs) in 2020 (44,233) amounted to 88% of the 2019 figure (50,249). The total number of new cancers diagnosed in RACs to end-2020 stood at 94% of the 2019 figure.

The number GP e-referrals to RACs for January - July 2021 (27,714) stands at 117% of the activity for the corresponding weeks in 2019 (23,757). An important message to everyone now is that, if you have any concerns about cancer, please go to your GP who will arrange appropriate follow-up care. Our cancer diagnostic and treatment services are open, and our healthcare staff will provide any necessary care. Funding of €12m has been allocated this year for the restoration of cancer services to 95% of 2019 (pre-Covid) levels. This funding is being used to support hospitals in addressing backlogs, extending clinic times, providing additional clinics, increasing diagnostic capacity and providing locum/temporary support. It is also supporting virtual clinics and more accurate triage, and facilitating infrastructure and minor equipment purchases to increase capacity across RACs and surgical oncology, medical oncology and radiation oncology services. In addition, as part of Budget 2021, an extra €20m has been allocated

for the continued implementation of the National Cancer Strategy this year. This funding is being used to facilitate developments across cancer prevention, diagnosis, treatment and patient supports.

### **Tribunals of Inquiry**

992. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of claims notified to the CervicalCheck Tribunal since its establishment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41497/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The CervicalCheck Tribunal was established on 27 October 2020 under the CervicalCheck Tribunal Act 2019. Establishment of the Tribunal was finalised with the appointment of the nominated members to the Tribunal with effect from 1 December 2020.

The Tribunal has indicated to my Department that it has received eight claims and that these claims were made to the Tribunal by ten people. The claims received are a combination of new claims i.e. claims that were not the subject of proceedings before the High Court, and claims transferred from the High Court. I am advised that there has been further interest expressed in using the Tribunal, and it is anticipated that additional claims will be received.

The Tribunal is the most appropriate venue to hear and determine CervicalCheck claims. It has been specifically designed for that purpose. It is, of course, entirely up to eligible women as to whether or not they use it.

### **Health Service Executive**

993. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of claims notified or proceedings issued against CervicalCheck in each of the past five years, and to date in 2021, regarding the alleged misreading of smear tests; the details of these cases; the number of claims that came from women affected by the scandal; and the number that were from the families surviving women who died allegedly as a result of the misreading of smear tests. [41498/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The State Claims Agency (SCA) has a statutory remit to manage personal injury claims, including claims in respect of clinical negligence, on behalf of Delegated State Authorities (DSA's) including the Health Service Executive.

I have been informed by the SCA that the information contained within the attached document was extracted from the National Incident Management System (NIMS) as per the criteria below.

#### Criteria used

- Question 1 (Table 1) shows Claims received between 01/01/2016 to 01/08/2021.
- Question 2 (Table 2) shows Date Proceedings Issued between 01/01/2016 to 01/08/2021.
- Question 4:
  - Claims received between 01/01/2016 to 01/08/2021.
  - Incident Hazard Category equals 'Clinical Care'.

- Question 5

- Claims received between 01/01/2016 to 01/08/2021.
- Incident Hazard Category equals 'Exposure to Psychological hazards'
- Sub Hazard type equals 'Wrongful Death'

- Report is correct as at 01/08/2021

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq933-09-09-21\_en.pdf">cervicalcheck</a>]

### Health Services

994. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to an increase in the number of cancer patients travelling to Northern Ireland for treatment; and if he will provide this Deputy with any statistics he has on the issue. [41510/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I have not been made aware of any general increase in the number of patients travelling to Northern Ireland for cancer treatment.

We have strong collaboration North/South in relation to oncology matters. In particular, we have worked very closely together in relation to the provision of radiotherapy services for Irish patients in the North West Cancer Centre, Altnagelvin Area Hospital, Derry.

In 2020, a total of 200 Irish patients received radiation oncology treatment in Altnagelvin. This year, 144 Irish patients received treatment there to the end of July, compared to 117 for the same period in 2020. Over 700 Irish patients have benefitted from treatment in the North West Cancer Centre since it opened in November 2016.

### Covid-19 Pandemic

995. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the difficulty faced by Irish citizens who are abroad in obtaining a Covid-19 recovery certificate when they have tested positive while away; and if a plan is in place to ensure these persons can fly home with this certificate as proof of their recovery. [41511/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Travellers to Ireland are required to present proof of vaccination, proof of recovery or a relevant test result as evidence of their health status. A relevant test result is a negative RT-PCR test result based on a sample taken within 72 hours of arrival to Ireland or a positive RT-PCR COVID-19 test result taken at between 11 days and 180 days prior to arrival. Depending on the individual's travel history, they may be required to quarantine on arrival. Full details of measures applying when travelling to Ireland are published at [www.gov.ie/en/publication/77952-government-advice-on-international-travel/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/77952-government-advice-on-international-travel/).

### Covid-19 Pandemic

996. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health when EU digital Covid-19 certificates will issue in the case of persons (details supplied) whose certificates are required for travel to Malta; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41512/21]

1019. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Health when the Covid-19 vaccine certificate will issue to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41561/21]

1020. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Health when the Covid-19 vaccine certificates will issue to persons (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41562/21]

1024. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Health if assistance will be offered to persons (details supplied) on the issuing of the EU digital Covid-19 certificate in time for travel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41581/21]

1049. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Health if assistance can be offered to a person (details supplied) to issue the EU digital Covid-19 certificate in time for travel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41659/21]

1401. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health the status of three Covid-19 digital certificates (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42821/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 996, 1019, 1020, 1024, 1049 and 1401 together.

Over 3.3m Digital COVID Certificates have been issued via post and email from July 12th and remaining certificates are being processed for issue.

There are a small percentage of the overall number of applicants who have yet to receive their Digital COVID Certificate for vaccination. This unfortunately delay relates to a number of factors, including cases quality of data is insufficient or where GPs are uploading the remaining data to the system. Less than 0.9 % of all those vaccinated to-date are experiencing delays for these reasons.

To support the roll-out of Government policy, a helpline through the DCC Call-Center was set up to allow those members of the public who are travelling to deal directly with queries relating to the Digital COVID Certificate from Monday 19th of July 2021. The call centre has also since introduced new additional service channels. A new online form to request Recovery certificates for eligible persons was released on 22 July. Following this a portal allowing for Vaccine Certificate Request, Vaccine Certificate Details Update and a Vaccine Status portal were launched on the 30th July. All persons who have yet to receive a Digital COVID Certificate following a full course of vaccination are encouraged to make use of these points of contact to complete or correct their dataset in the system.

### **Emergency Departments**

997. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Health if there is a national protocol and guidelines for providing food to patients in accident and emergency departments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41518/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Emergency Departments**

998. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Health the guidelines on the frequency with which a patient is updated on their care while being in an accident and emergency department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41519/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Emergency Departments**

999. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Health if will consider that in cases in which a patient is told after triage that there is a 12-hour wait, the patient can be allowed to go home to rest and return to the hospital and not be put to the end of the queue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41520/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1000. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Health if there are plans to set up an email address for queries about the EU digital Covid-19 certificate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41523/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Government's primary focus was to fulfil our EU Obligations in a robust and effective way, including operability by 1 July in context of EU compliance; and delivery of certificates to eligible members of the public in line with Government's lifting of restrictions on non-essential travel since Monday, 19 July.

To support the roll-out of Government policy, a helpline through the DCC Call-Centre was set up to allow those members of the public who are travelling to deal directly with queries relating to the Digital COVID Certificate from Monday 19th of July 2021. The call centre has also since introduced new additional service channels. A new online form to request Recovery certificates for eligible persons was released on 22 July. Following this a portal allowing for Vaccine Certificate Request, Vaccine Certificate Details Update and a Vaccine Status portal were launched on the 30th July.

*Question No. 1001 answered with Question No. 970.*

*Question No. 1002 answered with Question No. 970.*

### **Health Services Staff**

1003. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health the date by which a special needs psychiatrist already committed to by the HSE will take up a permanent position in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41528/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## Health Services Staff

1004. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the special needs psychiatrist previously handling patients in counties Cork and Kerry, has ceased seeing patients based in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41529/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## Covid-19 Pandemic

1005. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if he will advise on a matter raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) about the EU digital Covid-19 certificate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41539/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Just like the paper version of the Digital COVID Certificate (DCC), the digital version of the DCC contains personal information such as name, date of birth and details about the vaccination received by the individual. Data is held in an encoded but unencrypted form. It is an open EU wide standard and there are numerous tools and applications freely available which enable decoding of this information. Hence any device which scans these codes has the ability to display the information. It is an open interoperable standard, so that it can be used for checks at border crossings and as such, this risk cannot be totally eliminated.

Existing safeguards in the current DCC Checker App:

1. Only limited information is displayed.
2. After 2 minutes the information of the last scanned DCC code is automatically removed from the html of the web page and any “printing/saving” of the page will not save any information.
3. The verifier cannot use the browser back button to view earlier scanned codes.
4. The simple, streamlined design page makes it easy for an alert user to catch someone with open browser consoles trying to capture underlying information like DOB.1

Additional improvements in the upcoming versions of DCC Checker App: At present, after decoding - all the information is available as a JSON response but the new version will mask the DoB and UVCI fields.

In relation to the question regarding who is responsible for the protection of the certificate information, whether restaurants or bars ask for people to provide mobile numbers to facilitate contact tracing or whether they ask people to provide evidence of vaccination, they still have a duty of care under GDPR to treat that personal information correctly and in compliance with data protection regulations.

## Medical Aids and Appliances

1006. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost to extend

the flash glucose FreeStyle Libre device to persons over 21 years of age. [41540/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Disease Management**

1007. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost to establish a diabetes register. [41541/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In September 2019 Sláintecare Integration funding was allocated to the HSE to design and procure a National Diabetes Registry demonstrator product and develop a full specification plan for a National Diabetes Registry. The project was paused as it was dependent on the input and expertise of key HSE staff who were redeployed onto urgent on-going COVID-19 work. This project remains a priority and, subject to COVID-19, will be revisited in the future. Pending the development of the full specification plan, it is not possible to calculate the full cost of establishing the National Diabetes Registry at this point.

### **Disease Management**

1008. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost to establish a stroke register. [41542/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In 2012, the National Stroke Register (NSR), was first developed. In 2019, it came under the auspices of the National Office of Clinical Audit (NOCA) and evolved into the Irish National Audit of Stroke (INAS). The first INAS report (2019) Stroke which presents data and findings to the end of 2019 was published on 16th December 2020 by NOCA. It continues on from the NSR yearly reports, and access to data analysts and researchers provided through NOCA has allowed the Audit team to produce a more detailed evaluation of stroke care in Ireland than has been possible before.

Funding for the Audit is provided by the Health Service Executive (HSE) through the Office of the Chief Clinical Officer.

This Parliamentary Question relates to cost/funding issues which are an operational 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

### **Disease Management**

1009. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost to establish a heart valve disease register. [41543/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The management of heart valve disease is a specialists cardiac service.

The National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services is a key enabler for future policy and its recommendations will inform the future provision of services. The National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services commenced in January 2018 with Professor Phillip Nolan as Chair of the Steering Group. This Review aims to achieve optimal patient outcomes at population level with particular emphasis on the safety, quality and sustainability of the services that patients receive by establishing the need for an optimal configuration of a national adult cardiac service. This aligns with the Sláintecare reform programme. While substantial progress has been made on the Review, the COVID-19 Pandemic has impacted on the progress of the review, as the Chair has played a key role in the national COVID-19 response, both as a member of the NPHE and Chair of the Irish Epidemiological Modelling Advisory Group. Work is now underway to finalise the Review to completion over the coming months.

As part of the response to this Parliamentary Question relates to a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Disease Management**

1010. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost to extend the type 2 diabetes cycle of care to all people with type 2 diabetes. [41544/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In October 2015, the Diabetes cycle of care programme was introduced nationally by the HSE. Under this programme, adult GMS patients, those who hold a medical card or GP visit card, with a diagnosis of Type 2 Diabetes are eligible to be managed as part of the programme by their GP.

The 2019 GP Agreement introduced the chronic disease management (CDM) programme for GMS patients who have one or more specific chronic diseases, of which Type 2 Diabetes is one. The structured programme, commenced in 2020, is being rolled out to all adult GMS patients over four years (2020 to 2023), and will replace the Diabetes cycle of care programme as it is rolled out.

People who cannot, without undue hardship, arrange for the provision of medical services for themselves and their dependants may be entitled to a medical card. In the assessment process, the HSE can take into account medical costs incurred by an individual or a family. People who are not eligible for a medical card may still be able to avail of a GP visit card.

While Type 2 diabetic patients who do not hold a medical card or GP visit card are not eligible under the Diabetes cycle of care or the CDM programme, diabetes is one of the conditions covered by the Long Term Illness Scheme. Under this scheme, patients with diabetes can receive drugs, medicines, and medical and surgical appliances directly related to the treatment of their illness free of charge, regardless of whether they hold a medical card.

It is not possible to calculate the cost of extending the CDM programme, the successor to the diabetes cycle of care programme, to all with type 2 diabetes as the fees payable to GPs could only be determined following agreement with the IMO on the scope and content of the extended service, as well as the cost of the additional supports necessary to provide for that service. It is not possible to provide an accurate estimate based on the fees payable to GPs under the CDM programme due to issues such as the lack of current prevalence data, the number of undiagnosed patients and patient uptake, and comorbidity.

### **Disease Management**

1011. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated total annual diabetes-related expenditure. [41545/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Medical Aids and Appliances**

1012. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated annual expenditure change if provision of continuous glucose monitor, CGM, devices was replaced with flash glucose monitoring devices, for example, the FreeStyle Libre device. [41546/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1013. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health if he will report on the reason full Covid-19 data is not being published in particular the data on test numbers, positivity rates and data on Covid-19 cases in hospitals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41549/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Health Service Executive's (HSE) IT systems suffered a major cyber-attack on Friday 14th May 2021. This led to disruption of regular COVID-19 data updates.

In relation to test numbers and positivity rates, the cyber-attack did not lead to any pause in the HSE's weekly updates. All HSE weekly 'Covid-19 Testing and Contact Tracing Updates', with data on test numbers and positivity, are available here: [www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/covid-19-testing-contact-tracing-updates.html](http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/covid-19-testing-contact-tracing-updates.html)

The automated data transfer processes which updated the daily test numbers and positivity rates on the COVID-19 Data Hub: [covid-19.geohive.ie/](http://covid-19.geohive.ie/) were disrupted by the cyber-attack and these updates were paused. Full reporting of testing and positivity rates was restored to the COVID-19 Data Hub in mid-August with the full back-series of data for the period of the disruption also made available. This data is updated daily Monday-Saturday [covid-19.geohive.ie/pages/hospitals-icu--testing](http://covid-19.geohive.ie/pages/hospitals-icu--testing)

In relation to data on Covid-19 cases in hospitals, reporting of this data in the Department of Health's daily statement resumed shortly after the cyber-attack. This was based on a manual data collection process implemented by the HSE as an interim solution. On 17th July, the HSE resumed publication of the Daily Operations Update report [www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/coronavirus-daily-operations-updates.html](http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/coronavirus-daily-operations-updates.html) with details of Covid-19 on Covid-19 cases in hospitals and ICU.

Daily updates of Covid-19 cases in hospital also resumed on the COVID-19 Data Hub in mid-July, with a full back series of data for the duration impacted by the cyber-attack [covid-19.geohive.ie/pages/hospitals-icu--testing](http://covid-19.geohive.ie/pages/hospitals-icu--testing). This data is updated daily Monday-Sunday

### **Mental Health Services**

1014. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which efforts are being made to upgrade and expand children and adolescent mental health services with particular reference to the need for early assessment, diagnosis and support; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41553/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Departmental Correspondence**

1015. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if he will advise on a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41556/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Staff**

1016. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health when a second endocrinologist will be appointed to University Hospital Waterford; if he will provide details regarding the start date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41557/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Waiting Lists**

1017. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the wait times for brachytherapy by hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41559/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Services**

1018. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the reason brachytherapy is not available at the University Hospital Waterford; his plans to introduce brachytherapy for public patients at University Hospital Waterford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41560/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1019 answered with Question No. 996.*

*Question No. 1020 answered with Question No. 996.*

## Hospital Waiting Lists

1021. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons awaiting an endoscopy at University Hospital Waterford; the number of persons who have been waiting up to 30, 30 to 60, 60 to 90 and more than 90 days in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41577/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted in the last eighteen months as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic and more recently as a result of the ransomware attack. While significant progress was made in reducing waiting times from June 2020 onwards, the surge in Covid-19 cases in the first quarter of 2021 and the associated curtailment of acute hospital services, coupled with the ransomware attack of May 2021, has impacted waiting times. However, the HSE advise that acute services are now almost all fully restored to pre cyber-attack levels, and are operating in line with relevant Covid protocols.

My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) are focusing on improving access to elective care in order to reduce waiting times for patients. These plans include increased use of private hospitals, funding weekend and evening work in public hospitals, funding “see and treat” services where minor procedures are provided at the same time as outpatient consultations, providing virtual clinics and increasing capacity in the public hospital system.

An additional €240 million has been provided in Budget 2021 for an access to care fund, €210m of which has been allocated to the HSE and a further €30m to the NTPF. This is to be used to fund additional capacity to address the shortfall arising as a result of infection control measures taken in the context of COVID-19, as well as addressing backlogs in waiting lists.

My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are currently working on a Multiannual Waiting List Plan to address waiting lists and bring them in line with Sláintecare targets over the coming years.

The HSE continues to work to improve access, particularly to urgent colonoscopy services. In addition, the NTPF is working closely with individual hospitals to improve access to endoscopy/colonoscopy services for waiting list patients, including through the outsourcing of G.I. Scopes treatment to private hospitals for clinically suitable patients, where capacity is available.

The data requested by the Deputy regarding the number of persons awaiting an Endoscopy at University Hospital Waterford; the number of persons who have been waiting up to 30, 30 to 60, 60 to 90 and more than 90 days is outlined in the attached document.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq1021-09-09-21\_en.xlsx">endoscopy</a>]

## Covid-19 Pandemic

1022. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to a campaign by an organisation (details supplied) calling for compensation for healthcare staff in recognition for their sacrifices made as workers on the frontline of a health service dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will provide a formal response to the campaign. [41579/21]

1165. **Deputy Richard O’Donoghue** asked the Minister for Health his plans to compensate frontline workers for their exceptional work carried out during the pandemic; and if he will

make a statement on the matter. [41917/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1022 and 1165 together.

I wish to convey my sincere gratitude to health sector workers in relation to their continuing efforts in the delivery of health services during this very challenging pandemic period. The Department is supportive of efforts by all sides to seek a resolution of this matter. It would not be appropriate to comment any further given that this matter has been referred to the Labour Court, save that the Department and the HSE acknowledge frontline healthcare workers' critical and significant response to this pandemic, and are working to appropriately recognise those efforts.

### **Departmental Contracts**

1023. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the amount a company (details supplied) is being paid to operate the EU digital Covid certificate helpline on behalf of his Department; and if there are penalties for missed targets and poor delivery of service by the company. [41580/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Over 3.3m Digital COVID Certificates have been issued via post and email from July 12th and remaining certificates are being processed for issue. Of course there are a small percentage of the overall number who have yet to receive their vaccination certificates and this relates to a number of factors e.g GPs who are uploading remaining data and also in cases where the quality of data is sufficient. This accounts for less than 0.9 % of all those vaccinated to-date.

To support the roll-out of Government policy, a helpline through the DCC Call-Center was set up to allow those members of the public who are travelling to deal directly with queries relating to the Digital COVID Certificate from Monday 19th of July 2021. The call centre has also since introduced new additional service channels. A new online form to request Recovery certificates for eligible persons was released on 22 July. Following this a portal allowing for Vaccine Certificate Request, Vaccine Certificate Details Update and a Vaccine Status portal were launched on the 30th July.

In order to mobilise the DCC Call-Center, DoH entered into a contract with Accenture to capture service requirements for the coming months. The contract, envisaged to run for 7 months, is based on an estimated fee of €6.5 million relating to an agreed scope, assumptions and estimate volumes. The contract fee is structured on a blend of components including a time and materials rate card based on the Office of Government Procurement (OGP) Multi Supplier Framework Agreement for the Provision of External ICT Technical Support Services (between Accenture Limited and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform), an estimate of fees based on a bill of materials for a CRM system, fixed fees based on call-agents resource levels and technology deployed and projected call volume from members of the public. The actual fees are determined on a monthly basis based on actual services and their performance levels delivered during the previous months, and the actual usage of consumption based services linked to call volumes from members of the public .

*Question No. 1024 answered with Question No. 996.*

### **Hospital Services**

1025. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the services that will be provided in the second catheterisation laboratory at University Hospital Waterford; if services will include primary percutaneous coronary intervention procedures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41582/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Staff**

1026. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if funding will be provided for the recruitment of the additional interventional cardiologists and supporting staff to enable University Hospital Waterford to staff a 24/7 primary percutaneous coronary intervention service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41583/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In 2016, the Herity Report concluded that the needs of the effective catchment population of University Hospital Waterford (UHW) could be accommodated from a single Cath lab and recommended that the operating hours of the existing Cath lab should be extended.

The HSE has advised that discussions are still on-going to commence extended working days (8am-8pm) in the Cath Lab in University Hospital Waterford in. It is intended to progress to 7 day extended hours working on an incremental basis during 2021.

The Herity Report also recommended that the current 9 to 5 provision of emergency pPCI services at UHW should cease to allow the hospital to focus on the much larger volume of planned work. The then Minister for Health asked the Department to address the implications of this recommendation by arranging for a National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services.

The *National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services* commenced in January 2018. This Review aims to achieve optimal patient outcomes at population level with particular emphasis on the safety, quality and sustainability of the services that patients receive by establishing the need for an optimal configuration of a national adult cardiac service. This aligns with the Sláintecare reform programme.

While substantial progress has been made on the Review, the COVID-19 Pandemic has impacted on its progress. However, it is intended that the Review will continue and work is now underway to progress this. The Steering Group are due to reconvene in September with a view to finalisation of the Review over the coming months.

### **Hospital Equipment**

1027. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if the second catheterisation laboratory at University Hospital Waterford will be fully equipped to the same standard as the first laboratory; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41584/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Health Service Executive is responsible for the delivery of public healthcare infrastructure projects, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly in relation to this matter.

### **Departmental Staff**

1028. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health the current policy regarding the employment of persons with disabilities in his Department and in each State and semi-State body under the aegis of his Department; the disability quota of his Department at present; if there is an active campaign to increase the disability workforce from the current target of 3% to a minimum of 6% by 2024; if this quota has now been exceeded; if so, the details of same; if there has been an advertised competition in relation to the quota; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41596/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 requires the Department, along with all public service bodies, to progressively increase the percentage of our workforce with a disability to 6% by 2024.

All employees within the Department are asked to declare a disability through an anonymous online survey on a voluntary basis. The responses are gathered and returned to the Central Monitoring Committee annually. The survey returns show that the number of declarations has almost doubled from 3.6% in 2015 to 7.1% in 2020.

The Department engages in the following activities to promote and support the employment of people with a disability:

- Recruitment is dealt with through the Public Appointments Service, and as such, is subject to the policies and procedures in place for that organisation, in particular, I refer you to the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024.

- Follows the Civil Service Code of Practice for the Employment of People with Disabilities.

- Has a designated DLO to act as the point of contact for staff with disabilities, their line managers and the HR Unit to provide assistance and support to both staff and their line managers by the provision of information, advice and supports, where necessary.

- Participates in the Willing Able Mentoring (WAM), which is a work placement programme that aims to promote access to the labour market for graduates with disabilities. There was one WAM placement in 2020.

- The Department facilitated a weeklong transition year student work experience programme from two local schools in 2020 with 4 out of 8 of these students living with disabilities. The purpose of this programme is to encourage these students to pursue a career in the civil service.

- Provides training to staff

- The Department also periodically offers unconscious bias, disability awareness, diversity & inclusion and SAFETalk training to department staff

A Monitoring Committee within the Department of Health collects annual data on the number of people with a disability employed in the HSE (including section 38 agencies) and Non-Commercial State Agencies. Out of the 23 agencies reported on for 2020, 19 of them met or exceeded the current target of 3%. 7 of these agencies already exceeded the future target of 6%. The Monitoring Committee and the National Disability Authority work with the agencies under the Department's aegis in order to meet and exceed the targets set. The reasons for the failure of a small number of agencies to meet the national target are explored and discussed, with feedback given to improve for the coming year.

## Vaccination Programme

1029. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the risk-benefit analysis carried out by National Immunisation Advisory Committee, NIAC, with regard to the Covid-19 vaccination of the 12 to 15 years of age cohort. [41611/21]

1031. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the long-term testing there has been on the vaccine and children as young as 12 years of age. [41613/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1029 and 1031 together.

In clinical trials of children and young people aged 12-15 years in the case of Comirnaty® (Pfizer-BioNTech) and 12-17 years for Spikevax® (Moderna), the point estimate for efficacy of both vaccines was reported as 100% in these age groups. Reactogenicity occurred at a slightly higher frequency in these age groups compared to adults, but side effects from the vaccine were similar to those experienced by adults e.g. injection site pain, fatigue, headache. Vaccination in those 12-15 years is associated with short-lived, self-limited side effects.

The National Immunisation Advisory Committee considered the benefits and risks to this age group of receiving a COVID-19 vaccine, as well as the short and longer-term impacts of SARS-CoV-2 infection on children and young people in this age group and recommended that vaccination be extended to those aged 12-15 years. COVID-19 infections in those aged 12-15 years are usually asymptomatic or mild. Hospitalisation rates, rates of ICU admission are very low and death is rare. This does not exclude the possibility of severe COVID-19 developing, even in the previously healthy child. The risk of hospitalisation is higher in those with underlying chronic medical conditions and can approach that of older adults with risk conditions. NIAC also considered other potential risk factors for children and young people aged 12-15 years as a result of contracting SARS-Cov-2 COVID-19 including Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C) and long-COVID, as well as the psycho-social impact of COVID-19 on this age group.

The European Medicines Agency (EMA) has recommended granting an extension of indication to both Comirnaty and Spikevax to include use in children aged 12 years and older and has concluded that the benefits of Comirnaty and Spikevax in children and young people in this age group outweigh the risks, in particular in those with conditions that increase the risk of severe COVID-19.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1030. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the illness rate, hospitalisation rate, ICU rate, long Covid rate and mortality rate per 100,000 for each age cohort from 12 years of age upwards in relation to Covid-19. [41612/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1031 answered with Question No. 1029.*

### **Vaccination Programme**

1032. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the system in Ireland to count and detail each side effect that occurs as a result of each Covid-19 vaccine delivered; the body that collects this information; and the details of the statistics collected. [41614/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA) operates the national adverse reaction reporting system, through which health-care professionals and members of the public can notify a report of a suspected adverse reaction (ADR) to vaccines on a voluntary basis.

It is important to note that the HPRA receives reports based on suspicion that an adverse experience may be associated with vaccination. This does not necessarily mean that the vaccine caused the adverse experience. The information received by the HPRA may also be limited at the time of initial reporting (for example the report may or may not specify whether the patient has been hospitalised), and more information about individual reports may become available through follow-up.

The majority of regularly reported suspected side effects are consistent with the types of events typically observed following vaccination, including those described in the product information for the individual vaccines. Whilst not experienced by everyone, all vaccines have some side effects, the vast majority of which are mild to moderate in nature. These side effects need to be continuously balanced against the benefits of preventing COVID-19 illness. Overall, the national reporting experience in Ireland continues to support the assessment that the benefits of COVID-19 vaccines outweigh the risks.

The HPRA has been publishing regular public safety updates on reporting experience with COVID-19 vaccines, including information on the numbers and nature of these reports. To date, ten such updates have been published and are accessible from the HPRA website ([www.hpra.ie/homepage/medicines/covid-19-updates/covid-19-vaccine-communications](http://www.hpra.ie/homepage/medicines/covid-19-updates/covid-19-vaccine-communications)), with the most recent publication issued on 12 August.

### **Assisted Human Reproduction**

1033. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health if he plans to introduce legislation to amend the assisted human reproduction Bill to ensure that children born to LGBTQ+ couples will have a legal parent-child relationship with both parents; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41621/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Children and Family Relationships Act 2015 (Act of 2015) reforms and updates family law to address the needs of children living in diverse family types. Parts 2 & 3 of the Act of 2015 commenced in May 2020 and provide a legal framework for parentage of children who are born as result of assisted human reproduction (AHR) involving donated eggs or sperm or embryos. Records are also required to be kept in relation to the identity of the donor(s), the child, the mother and the intending parent for the purposes of enabling donor-conceived children to access information relating to their genetic heritage.

Drafting of a bill on AHR and associated areas of research is ongoing by officials in my Department, in conjunction with the Office of the Attorney General. This comprehensive and far-reaching piece of legislation encompasses the regulation, of a wide range of practices, including: gamete (sperm or egg) and embryo donation for AHR and research; domestic surrogacy; pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) of embryos; posthumous assisted reproduction; and embryo and stem cell research. The legislation also provides for the establishment of an independent regulatory authority for AHR.

Subject to certain criteria being met, AHR treatment will be available to people irrespective of gender, marital status or sexual orientation.

The aim of the AHR legislation is to promote and ensure the health and safety of children born as a result of AHR, people undergoing AHR and intending parents.

### **Medical Qualifications**

1034. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health when pre level 3 medical exams will recommence. [41624/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The PRES 3 exams are hosted on behalf of the Medical Council by the medical schools. Due to the pandemic, the PRES 3 exams scheduled to take place in March 2020 were postponed and it has not been possible to reschedule the exams since. The Medical Council has had discussions with the medical schools to explore the possibility of running the PRES 3 exams but due to the pandemic and resulting public health restrictions, the medical schools did not feel they could safely host the exams for the Council. The Council is in contact with the Medical Schools and the matter is being followed up as a matter of urgency so as to be able to offer the PRES at the earliest opportunity.

### **Residential Institutions**

1035. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if HIQA or the HSE have undertaken any prosecutions against any residential care facilities, proprietors, persons in charge and entities for any breaches of regulations; if so, the regulations breached by each such facility, persons and entity; the name of the persons, facilities and entity prosecuted; the outcome of such prosecutions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41625/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** The Chief Inspector of Social Services in 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 Chief Inspector, 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.

As the independent regulator of nursing homes, the Chief Inspector determines the appropriate approach and interventions required to monitor and ensure compliance with the regulatory framework. The Chief Inspector adopts a risk-based approach to regulation, prioritising monitoring, inspection and enforcement, based on the assessment of the risk, including the type of enforcement action to be taken.

Part 8 of the Health Act 2007 sets out the tools for enforcement available to the Chief Inspector in the event that a provider is non-compliant with specific provisions within the Act or the aligned regulations.

Specifically the Chief Inspector may issue the provider with a warning and time frame to come into compliance and where there is a sustained failure to achieve compliance the Chief Inspector may:

- place conditions on a centre's registration;
- cancel the centre's registration or refuse to renew the registration;
- prosecute the provider.

## Conditions on a centre's registration

Every designated centre is registered with 3 standard conditions which reflect the service, the building and the number of residents who can live in that centre. Applying additional conditions to the registration of a nursing home makes it clear that the ongoing registration of the nursing home is dependent on the registered provider adhering to the condition. The following is an example of an additional condition:

### **“Condition 4**

*Notwithstanding the requirements placed on the registered provider to comply with the Health Act 2007 (Care and Welfare of Residents in Designated centres for Older People) Regulations 2013, the registered provider shall take all necessary action to comply with: Regulation 23: Governance and Management Regulation 4: Policies and Procedures Regulation 26: Risk Management Regulation 27: Infection Control Regulation 8: Protection Regulation 17: Premises Regulation 6: Healthcare Regulation 5: Individualised assessment and care plan to the satisfaction of the Chief Inspector .”*

To date:

- 113 nursing homes have additional restrictive conditions placed upon them.

Cancellation of a centre's registration or refusal to renew its registration

Repeated findings of regulatory non-compliance and concern about the care and welfare of residents may result in the Chief Inspector cancelling the registration of a centre or refusing to renew the registration of a centre.

Since the beginning of 2020 the Chief Inspector has:

Used Section 50 of the Health Act to:

- refuse an application to register a nursing home on the grounds that the applicant could not demonstrate compliance with relevant regulations;
- refuse an application to renew the registration of a nursing home on the grounds that the applicant could not demonstrate compliance with relevant regulations; and,
- to reduce the occupancy of a nursing home from 53 to 37 when the provider failed to come into compliance with relevant regulations.

Used Section 51 of the Health Act to:

- cancel the registration of one nursing home when the provider passed away; and,
- issue a notice of proposed decision to cancel the registration of one nursing home when the provider failed to come into compliance with relevant regulations.

Used Section 52 of the Health Act to:

- reduce the occupancy of a nursing home from 86 to 43 when the provider failed to come into compliance with relevant regulations.

Used Section 59 of the Health Act to:

- apply to the District Court to cancel the registration of two nursing homes:

1. Donore Nursing Home, Bray (Registered Provider: Brecon Care Limited)

2. Oaklands Nursing Home, Listowel (Bolden (Nursing) Limited.)

Prosecutions

The Chief Inspector has twice prosecuted registered providers of nursing homes for breaches of the Health Act 2007.

*Chief Inspector v Registered Provider, Carysfort Nursing Home*

Section 65 of the Health Act 2007 requires a registered provider of a designated centre to submit information to the Chief Inspector of Social Services which the Chief Inspector deems necessary for the performance of her functions under the Health Act 2007. The defendant was named on the register maintained by the Chief Inspector as the registered provider of Carysfort Nursing Home. In March 2018, the defendant failed to submit information requested by the Chief Inspector under Section 65 of the Health Act 2007 to enable the Chief Inspector to carry out her functions under the Health Act 2007. The Chief Inspector commenced a prosecution against the defendant in March 2018 contrary to section 79(2)(a) of the Health Act 2007 as amended, the penalty for which is provided for under Section 79(4) of the Health Act 2007 as amended. The defendant pleaded guilty to the offence at Dublin District Court on the 12 March 2020 and was convicted and a fine was imposed of €500 with 6 months to pay.

*Chief Inspector of Social Services v. Hillcrest House Nursing Home Limited*

Section 46 of the Health Act 2007 prohibits the operation of a nursing home in the absence of registration and this is an offence under Section 79 of the Health Act 2007. This prosecution was commenced by the Chief Inspector of Social Services on the 21 December 2018 against the provider of residential service to older persons, namely Hillcrest House Nursing Home Limited. The prosecution was for failure to comply with Sections 46(1) and 79(1)(b) of the Health Act i.e. failure by the service provider to register the residential service with the Chief Inspector in accordance with the legislation. Hillcrest House Nursing Home Limited pleaded guilty to the offence at a sitting of Donegal District Court on the 20 March 2019. The District Court convicted the defendant and imposed a fine of €500 with 3 months to pay.

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

1036. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Health the compensation or reward that will be paid or given to nurses and midwives in view of their efforts throughout the duration of the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41629/21]

1306. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if he has considered the Irish Nurses and Midwives' Organisation, INMO, compensation claim; if he has responded to the INMO; the steps he is taking to recognise the contribution of healthcare workers during the pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42408/21]

1396. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide ten days of compensatory leave for healthcare workers due to fatigue and overwork throughout the pandemic as requested by a union (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42785/21]

1399. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health his response to the call from a union (details supplied) for nurses and midwives to receive additional compensation for their work during the pandemic, including compensatory leave due to fatigue and overwork. [42788/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1036, 1306, 1396 and 1399 together.

I wish to convey my sincere gratitude to nurses and midwives in relation to their continuing efforts in the delivery of health services during this very challenging pandemic period. The Department is supportive of efforts by all sides to seek a resolution of this matter. It would not be appropriate to comment any further given that this matter has been referred to the Labour Court, save that the Department and the HSE acknowledge all frontline healthcare workers' critical and significant response to this pandemic, and are working to appropriately recognise those efforts.

### Health Services

1037. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding support for persons and families dealing with dementia given the lack of understanding of the illness and the effects it has on many families; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41632/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** The National Dementia Strategy aims to improve how we provide care for people with dementia, their families and their carers. Implementation of this strategy is a key commitment in the Programme for Government. The National Dementia Office, within the HSE, oversees implementation of the strategy.

A range of health and social care services are provided to people with dementia, their families and carers under the National Dementia Strategy. These initiatives include:

- The Dementia Understand Together in Communities Campaign, a public awareness campaign aimed at inspiring people from all sections of society to stand together with the 500,000 Irish people whose families have been affected by dementia;

- Dementia specific homecare packages, which aim to support people living with dementia who have high support needs;

- The dementia advisor service, which provides a highly responsive and individualised information and signposting service for people living with dementia and their families;

- A network of 25 Memory Technology Resource Rooms for people who would like to know more about the products and devices which can help manage memory difficulties;

- In-home day care services for people who are unable to access day services due to the public health restrictions;

- The Intellectual disability memory service, a centre of excellence in pro-active dementia assessment and diagnosis for people with an intellectual disability.

- The National Dementia Diagnostic Services in Dublin, which are being expanded this year to include a new regional memory clinic in Cork along with four additional memory assessment support services in Mayo, Sligo, Waterford and Wexford.

Finally, in Budget 2021, the Government allocated €12.9 million for a number of dementia specific measures. This allocation comprised of €7m for an additional 250,000 hours of home support for people living with dementia, €0.9m to expand the dementia advisor service operated by the Alzheimer Society of Ireland and €5m for further implementation of the National

Dementia Strategy.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1038. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding support for persons suffering the effects of long Covid and who are unable to return to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41633/21]

1255. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the status of the development of specific guidance on the treatment of long Covid; the criteria and strategies for the ongoing evaluation of patients; if research reports and data are or will be made publicly available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42233/21]

1347. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the incidence of long Covid in each age cohort; the number of persons in each age cohort with long Covid after 3,6,9 and 12 months; his plans to ensure that an effective care pathway is put in place for such patients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42487/21]

1516. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health his plans to deploy resources to research the myriad adverse health effects of what is known as long Covid; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43158/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1038, 1255, 1347 and 1516 together.

COVID-19 is a new disease so information on it, its features, incidence and its course are still emerging. Scientific and clinical evidence is evolving on the long-term effects of COVID-19. An increasing number of reports and studies are now being published on the topic, however, at present there is no agreement on the definition or the terminology.

It is recognised that persistent and prolonged symptoms can occur after acute COVID-19 infection in a proportion of patients, including in some patients who did not develop symptoms severe enough to require hospitalisation. My Department, through the Health Research Board, continues to fund research into the clinical impacts of COVID-19.

Patients with persistent symptoms following COVID-19 infection may be followed up by their GP or in hospital settings as clinically appropriate. People in the community who are concerned about persistent symptoms following Covid-19 should contact their GP in the first instance. Treatment is currently focused on management of specific symptoms.

Specific guidance on the treatment of 'Long COVID' is presently under development both here and internationally.

The HSE is currently assessing need and the best way to care for those impacted by Long COVID to ensure the appropriate supports are in place. As part of this work on post-COVID care, the HSE is examining how it can model the possible numbers that will be affected, noting that this will take time as more evidence emerges. I understand that the HSE has also been in touch with a group of people who are suffering post-COVID symptoms to inform understanding.

The Department of Health will continue to develop an understanding of the implications of Long COVID to inform policy as appropriate.

## Healthcare Policy

1039. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the precise criteria around the rights of partners at the birth of their child; if decisions are made on an individual basis or on foot of general policy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41639/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## Covid-19 Pandemic

1040. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if he has been appraised of expressions of dissatisfaction from expectant mothers who have had difficulty arranging for their partners to be present at maternity hospitals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41640/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## Cannabis for Medicinal Use

1041. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the judgment by the Court of Justice of the European Union in a case (details supplied) in which it was ruled that an EU member state may not prohibit the marketing of a cannabis product when it is extracted from the cannabis sativa plant in its entirety; and if clarification on the way Ireland will implement workable rules that are consistent with EU legislation and regulations will be provided. [41642/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The matters raised are *sub judice*, currently the subject of a legal challenge in which the Minister for Health is a respondent and can therefore offer no further comment.

## Departmental Projects

1042. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health if further details will be provided on capital projects (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41643/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Health Service Executive is responsible for the delivery of public healthcare infrastructure projects, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly in relation to this matter.

## Vaccination Programme

1043. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health if a citizen of the Republic of Ireland who has been fully vaccinated by the public health authorities in Northern Ireland can obtain an EU digital Covid certificate; if so, the process in place to obtain this certificate in such cases; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41645/21]

1245. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health when EU digital Covid-19 certificates will be available to EU citizens vaccinated in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42198/21]

1292. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the expected timeframe for the launch of the EU digital Covid certificate portal outlining details in relation to the release of phase one and two; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42391/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1043, 1245 and 1292 together.

Following the successful rollout of the initial implementation phase of the EU Digital COVID Certificate in Ireland, the Government is creating a specific portal to enable Irish citizens vaccinated outside of the EU, with vaccines authorised for use in Ireland, to obtain a COVID certificate valid in Ireland and across the EU.

This portal is currently being advanced on a cross departmental basis involving technical and process development, and resource management. It is expected that this portal will be launched in the coming weeks.

### **National Children's Hospital**

1044. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health if the national children's hospital will have any genome research facilities; if so, the details of the planned facilities and the future services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41648/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly as soon as possible.

### **Programme for Government**

1045. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health the status of the commitment in the Programme for Government to establish a national genetics and genomics medicine network; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41650/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** A paper which considered the potential role of genomic medicine in Ireland and which reviewed genomics strategies in other countries was presented to the Department of Health management board in January 2020.

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic led to a rapid reprioritisation of the Department's activities to manage the health and social care system's response to the crisis.

As a result of this, the future role of genomics medicine in Ireland, and the implementation of this Programme for Government commitment, remains under deliberation by the Department of Health

### **Disability Services**

1046. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Health the capacity level each adult disability day service provider provided after Covid-19 restrictions were lifted to allow them to reopen; the amount of funding that was allocated to each adult disability day service provider

to enable them to expand their capacity; the capacity level each adult disability day service provider provided after receiving this funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41651/21]

1047. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Health the adult disability day service providers which applied for funding to enable them to expand their capacity after Covid-19 restrictions were lifted to allow them to reopen; the adult disability day service providers which did not apply for funding to enable them to expand their capacity after Covid-19 restrictions were lifted to allow them to reopen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41652/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1046 and 1047 together.

Day services re-opened at 39% capacity at service locations throughout August and early September of 2020, and by end of January 2021 this had increased to 51%. The combination of supports in the location, outreach supports, and remote supports provides an overall quantum of support to service users of over 60% at the end of January. The increase in day service capacity was supported by additional funding of €30 million provided in Budget 2021 to increase capacity in buildings and provide extra staff. This funding provided an increase in day services by an average of one day a week for 14,940 people against September 2020 service levels.

I was very pleased this week to announce that adult day services for people with disabilities will return to full capacity by October 22nd, in line with our COVID 19 response ‘Reframing the Challenge’ roadmap for the lifting of restrictions.

Day service providers have been requested to develop their individual day service location roadmaps to increase the level of day service provision to 100% restoration for each day service user by October 22nd.

Infection prevention and control measures that have been introduced to support the safe delivery of adult disability day services since the onset of COVID 19 will remain in place after October 22nd. These arrangements include risk assessments, enhanced environmental hygiene, and pod like arrangements in day service locations. Mask wearing will remain in place in day services, except for those who are exempt from wearing a face covering.

I also note that on 2nd September, also in line with the government statement on ‘Reframing the Challenge’, the HSE issued guidance to all providers that day service transport can now return to 100% capacity, with all relevant infection prevention and control measures still to be observed, including the wearing of face coverings where possible and appropriate for service users.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1047 answered with Question No. 1046.*

### **Vaccination Programme**

1048. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the current policy definition of fully vaccinated in the context of Covid-19; if immunocompetent persons under 50 years of age with a previous laboratory confirmed infection within nine months are considered fully vaccinated after one or two doses; the reason for this; if a second dose or booster shot will be required regardless; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41653/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) immunisation guidelines advise that those aged under 50 years of age who have had a previous laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 infection within the previous 9 months and are not immunocompromised should be considered fully vaccinated after a single vaccine dose. Those previously infected, aged over 50 and/or immunocompromised should receive a full COVID-19 vaccine regimen as they may have mounted a sub-optimal response to infection and require a full vaccination schedule.

The guidelines are available at:

[www.hse.ie/eng/health/immunisation/hcpinfo/guidelines/covid19.pdf](http://www.hse.ie/eng/health/immunisation/hcpinfo/guidelines/covid19.pdf)

The HSE will continue to offer all people a second dose, regardless of a positive COVID-19 test. The option will remain for individuals to choose not to take their second dose if they so wish. It is recommended that individuals discuss these options with their treating physician who is in the best position to give appropriate advice.

The NIAC has recently recommended an extended primary vaccination course with an mRNA vaccine for immunocompromised individuals aged 12 years and older, regardless of whether the primary course was of an mRNA or an adenoviral vector vaccine. The third dose of an mRNA vaccine should be given a minimum of two months after the last dose of the primary vaccination schedule.

The four European Medicines Agency (EMA) approved vaccines have specific definitions for when a person is considered fully vaccinated. It is essential that all individuals receive the full course of vaccination, as per the vaccination schedule if they are to be fully protected.

The following table sets out the definition of ‘fully vaccinated’:

A full course of any one of the following vaccines	Regarded as fully vaccinated after
2 doses of Pfizer-BioNTech Vaccine: BNT162b2 (Comirnaty®)	7 days
2 doses of Moderna Vaccine: CX-024414 (Moderna®)	14 days
2 doses of Oxford-AstraZeneca Vaccine: ChAdOx1-SARS-COV-2 (Vaxzevria® or Covishield)	15 days
1 dose of Johnson & Johnson/Janssen Vaccine: Ad26.COV2-S [recombinant] (Janssen®)	14 days

*Question No. 1049 answered with Question No. 996.*

### General Practitioner Services

1050. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Health the status of the introduction of free general practitioner care for children aged between six and 12 years of age; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41661/21]

1123. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health when he will consult with an organisation (details supplied) on the extension of general practitioner care without fees to children aged 7 and 8 years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41802/21]

1517. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Health when free general practitioner care will be extended to those under the age of eight years. [43175/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1050, 1123 and 1517 together.

The Government is committed to increasing access to GP care without charges for children, an important healthcare measure that will remove a potentially prohibitive cost barrier

to accessing GP care and will help to improve children's health as they develop. At present all children under six years of age are eligible for a GP visit card and therefore GP care without charges. The Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Act 2020 provides, amongst other things, for the phased expansion of GP care without fees to all children aged 12 years and under. The initial stage of this phased expansion will be the provision of GP care without fees to all children aged between 6 and 8. The appropriate date for commencing the expansion remains under consideration in light of COVID-19 and the additional pressures the expansion might place on general practice in that context. This date will be determined following consultation with the IMO. It is important to ensure that any additional pressures placed on general practice will not limit its capacity to meet the needs of all patients in the community.

### **General Practitioner Services**

1051. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated additional cost of universal general practitioner care; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41663/21]

1052. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated additional cost to introduce universal general practitioner care for each annualised income bracket starting with €0 to €14,999 and building in increments of €5,000 to €100,000 plus, in tabular form, including the population size of each bracket. [41664/21]

1053. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated additional cost of providing a general practitioner visit card for each annualised income bracket starting with €0 to €14,999 and building in increments of €5,000 to €100,000 plus, in tabular form, including the population size of each bracket. [41665/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1051 to 1053, inclusive, together.

GMS contractors receive a range of capitation rates, fee per service payments and practice supports. Extending GP care without charges to all citizens who do not currently hold a medical card or GP visit card would encompass a further 2.88 million people approximately. It is not possible to definitively calculate the cost of universal GP care without charges, as a whole or by annualised income brackets, given the wide range of payments and variables that have to be accounted for.

Such a calculation would require a complex and detailed modelling exercise to account for a range of demographic changes, future projections of service demands and variation in the number of GPs and the allowances that could be paid.

Additionally, the fees payable to GPs could only be determined following agreement with the IMO on the scope and content of the general practitioner service to be provided, as well as on the future of the various other supports provided to general practice.

*Question No. 1052 answered with Question No. 1051. Question No. 1052 answered with Question No. 1051.*

*Question No. 1053 answered with Question No. 1051.*

### **Health Service Executive**

1054. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health if he will report on the temporary shutdown of HSE IT systems with regard to the steps and their associated timeline to restore IT capacity and resume normal services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41670/21]

1145. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the status of the cyberattack on the HSE and his Department; the computer systems that are now fully working; the systems yet to be fixed; and when the systems that are not yet functioning will be fully operational. [41865/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1054 and 1145 together.

The Health Service Executive (HSE) reported to the Joint Committee on Health on 23rd June 2021 with an update on the extent and response to the cyberattack. This can be found on the Oireachtas website at the following link:

*[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debateRecord/joint\\_committee\\_on\\_health/2021-06-23/debate/mul@/main.pdf](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debateRecord/joint_committee_on_health/2021-06-23/debate/mul@/main.pdf)*

The HSE response contains four steps or stages - the containment phase and the inform phase are complete.

The third phase, which involved the restoration of services and eradication of ransomware, is substantially complete. The cyberattack had the effect of removing access to most patient care systems and central business systems within the HSE. The initial efforts during phase 3 focused on restoring core patient care systems such as hospital radiotherapy, laboratory, imaging, pharmacy, mental health and patient administration systems along with basic email services. The HSE continues to work through the restoration phase and recently advised that over 95% of all servers and devices had been restored. Acute, community and corporate services are almost fully restored.

The majority of HSE staff can now have access email and most HSE Corporate systems have been restored. The Healthlink system that provides essential connectivity between GP systems and the rest of the health system is also fully functional.

Work on phase 4, the remedy phase, is also advancing. The HSE has deployed additional expertise, resources and technology to provide enhanced monitoring of systems and networks whilst it procures a permanent Security Operations Centre that will provide routine security and threat incidence monitoring in future.

Following a similar cyber attack at the Department of Health, all systems were restored to normal operational status within a relatively short period following the incident. Significant work has been completed to upgrade and strengthen the Department's security infrastructure since that time.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1055. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that many expectant parents are still being refused access to their partner for pre-natal appointments, delivery and hospital visits; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41672/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is an operational matter, I have

asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1056. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health if he will make available the public health data underpinning the continued closure of large indoor activity, leisure and exercise centres in excess of 500 sq. m; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41680/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy will be aware, gyms, swimming pools and leisure centres reopened on 7 June for individual training. Swimming lessons and classes were also permitted to take place. As outlined in COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting, which was published by Government on 31 August, organised indoor group activities including sports and dance classes can take place from 20 September with capacity limits of 100 people where all patrons are immune (vaccinated or recovered) or accompanied minors. Where patrons have mixed immunity status, pods of up to 6 participants will be permitted with multiple pods permitted subject to appropriate social distancing being maintained. These arrangements are also applicable to leisure facilities (including bowling, snooker halls, indoor play centres amusement arcades) where patrons have defined areas which are pre-booked. Based on the criteria of at or close to 90% of people 16 or over being fully vaccinated in the coming weeks and having regard to the incidence and behaviour of the disease at that time, from 22 October onwards, remaining restrictions on indoor sports activities and other indoor leisure/community activities will be lifted. Since the onset of the pandemic, we have saved lives and limited the impact of the disease on society in Ireland due to the huge effort of people across the country. Thanks to the hard work of the Irish people and the progress of our vaccination programme, we are now entering a new phase in the management of the pandemic. As our approach to the management of COVID-19 transitions from population wide restrictions to guidance we must continue to practice basic preventative behaviours, including in relation to self-isolation and restricting movements when advised, observing good respiratory and hand hygiene, physical distancing and mask wearing when appropriate.

COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting can be found online: [www.gov.ie/en/press-release/f5291-post-cabinet-statement-covid-19-reframing-the-challenge-continuing-our-recovery-and-reconnecting/](http://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/f5291-post-cabinet-statement-covid-19-reframing-the-challenge-continuing-our-recovery-and-reconnecting/)

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1057. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the Department of Education instructions which advise pregnant teachers that they are to return to work in September whether they are vaccinated or not; the way in which sending pregnant women into an environment in which they face possible Covid-19 infection for them and their unborn child can be justified given the presence of new and more infectious strains in Ireland. [41693/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) has recently updated its recommendations regarding vaccination for pregnant women. In April of this year, NIAC advised that pregnant women should be offered an mRNA COVID-19 vaccination between 14-36 weeks' gestation following an individual benefit/risk discussion with their obstetric care giver.

Following a review of the most recent evidence and in the context of the Delta variant,

NIAC has recommended that the previous term limits for receiving a vaccine by a pregnant woman should be removed and pregnant women and adolescents from 12 years and above should be offered an mRNA COVID-19 vaccine at any stage of pregnancy, following an individual benefit/risk discussion with their obstetric care giver. NIAC also point to a growing accumulation of evidence on the safety and effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccination in this cohort, which indicate that the benefits of vaccination outweigh any known or potential risks of COVID-19 vaccination during pregnancy.

NIAC have also recommended that there should be enhanced efforts to increase vaccine uptake in pregnant women, their partners and eligible household contacts, in order to protect both mother and baby from serious harm as a result of COVID-19.

### **General Practitioner Services**

1058. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that Templemore, County Tipperary is set to lose one of its two general practitioners; and his plans to address the situation given that there is already a lack of general practitioner services. [41698/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** GPs are self-employed private practitioners and therefore may establish practices at a place of their own choosing. Under the GMS scheme, the HSE contracts GPs to provide medical services without charge to medical card and GP visit card holders. Where a vacancy arises in a practice with a GMS contract, the HSE becomes actively involved in the selection process to find a replacement GP.

The Government is aware of the workforce issues currently facing general practice, including the limited access to GP services in certain areas, and has implemented a number of measures to improve recruitment and retention in general practice.

These measures include an increase in investment in general practice by approximately 40% (€210 million) between 2019 and 2023 under the terms of the 2019 GMS GP Agreement GP. The Agreement provides for increased support for GPs working in rural practices and for those in disadvantaged urban areas, and for improvements to maternity and paternity leave arrangements. In addition, the number of GPs entering training has been increased steadily over the past number of years, rising from 120 in 2009 to 233 in 2021.

These measures will see an increase in the number of GPs working in the State, improving access to GP services for patients throughout the country.

### **Social Welfare Benefits**

1059. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health if persons on invalidity pensions who reach retirement age can retain the use of medical cards regardless of income (details supplied); and if this will be reviewed for budget 2022 in October as was stated by the Tánaiste in June 2021. [41699/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy is aware, medical card eligibility is primarily based on financial assessment. In accordance with the Health Act 1970 (as amended), eligibility for a medical card is determined by the HSE. The HSE assesses each application on a qualifying financial threshold. This is the amount of income that an individual can earn per week and still qualify for a card. It is specific to the individual's own financial

circumstances.

Persons aged 69 and under are assessed under the general means tested medical card income thresholds which are based on an applicant's household income after tax, PRSI and the Universal Social Charge (USC) have been deducted. Certain expenses are also taken into account, for example mortgage payments, which helps to increase the amount a person can earn and still qualify for a medical card.

It is important to note that most social welfare payments (including Invalidity Pension) are means assessed as part of a medical card application once the applicant or spouse/partner has another source of income. However, where an applicant's household income is made up solely of social welfare payments, they will be eligible for a medical card.

Furthermore, income thresholds for a medical card (and GP visit cards) increase for those aged 66 to 69. Given that persons aged 66 will usually transfer to a State Pension at this point, if an applicant or married/co-habiting couple's household income remains comprised of social welfare payments solely they would continue to hold eligibility for a medical card. Therefore, transferring from an Invalidity Pension to the State Pension does not of itself result in a person losing eligibility for a medical card. In certain circumstances, an applicant or married/co-habiting couple may transfer to the State Pension but may then also be in receipt of additional income such as a private or occupational pension. This can result in such persons having to undergo a financial assessment to be reassessed to determine their eligibility for a medical card.

Finally, it should also be noted that the current eligibility framework is kept under regular review throughout the year. In relation to this particular issue as an anomaly does not arise further review of the matter is not considered necessary.

### **Vaccination Programme**

1060. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if certification of ineligibility for vaccination where advised by a medical professional will be provided as part of the digital Covid certificate or other means; if a provision will be made for those unable to be vaccinated in the certification system relating to travel and domestic restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41702/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The EU Digital COVID Certificate is proof that a person has either been vaccinated against COVID-19 or received a negative COVID-19 test result or recovered from COVID-19 in the last 6 months.

While the EU Digital COVID Certificate initiative can support safe travel within the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic it is not a precondition for travel.

### **Departmental Correspondence**

1061. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which he has received submissions from a group (details supplied) with particular reference to the efforts of such carers throughout the Covid-19 outbreak; if any particular issues have been raised with reference to staffing levels in public or private nursing homes or other settings in which patients were deemed to be at high-risk during the Covid-19 pandemic; his views on whether particular attention needs to be paid to specific areas in the aftermath of the pandemic with a view to optimising the level of protection for staff and patients throughout the public and private sectors;

and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41710/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** During the last year, both Minister Donnelly and I, and officials from my Department, have met with a number of groups that advocate for the interests of older people and residents of nursing homes and long-term residential care facilities. I met with representatives from the group referred to by the Deputy on 12 July this year, with members of bereaved families in attendance, and have subsequently corresponded with the Group.

The Nursing Homes Expert Panel was established, on foot of a NPHEP recommendation, to examine the complex issues surrounding the management of COVID-19 among this particularly vulnerable cohort. The Expert Panel report, which was published in August 2020, 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. 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.

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 health agencies and stakeholders. The recommendations of the report are varied and complex, are short, medium, and longer-term in nature, and require a mix of ongoing operational response to COVID-19 and a longer-term strategic reform. Those strategic reforms are, by their nature, complex and relate to whole of system issues. Many of the short- and medium-term recommendations have already been implemented.

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. 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.

The progression of the safe staffing framework in nursing homes is included in the recommendations of the Expert Panel report. Phase 3 of the Safe Staffing and Skill Mix Framework commenced in August 2020. This includes three distinct stages, the first of which will focus on nursing homes. This is a unique stage of the framework development as it is the first time it will span across public, private, and voluntary care settings. A National Taskforce, with representation from key stakeholders and agencies, has been established to develop a Framework for safe staffing and skill mix in long-term residential care settings for older persons. This important programme of work is progressing very well and it is anticipated that pilot testing of a model of staffing will commence with a baseline data collection in each of the pilot sites in the coming month.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1062. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which it was possible to ensure the availability of the highest possible standards of care and attention for older patients throughout the Covid-19 pandemic; if specific deficiencies were identified with a view to resolution; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41711/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** From the onset of

the COVID-19 pandemic, HIQA has maintained regulatory oversight of the health and social care services under its legal remit, monitoring information about services, carrying out inspections and supporting health and social care services.

HIQA has also endeavoured to ensure that the voices of residents and families continue to be heard.

HIQA's regulatory oversight from the onset of pandemic has included:

- contacting nursing homes by telephone every two weeks as part of its quality assurance programme;

- preparing and publishing guidance and self-assessments for providers to assess how prepared they were for COVID-19;

- assessments of nursing homes on contingency planning and preparedness for an outbreak of COVID-19;

- operating an Infection Prevention and Control Hub to give providers information on managing COVID-19;

- processing applications by nursing home providers to renew their registration or register new centres;

- carrying out risk inspections of nursing homes; and,

- providing the HSE and the Department of Health with sector information necessary to support nursing homes, addresses of nursing homes, staffing numbers and assessments of the prevailing risks.

HIQA's continuing support for the sector has included:

- publishing regulatory information notices to keep providers up to date on how it is regulating services;

- focusing the work of its Information Handling Centre on engaging with people who contacted HIQA with concerns; and,

- daily escalations of the numbers of residents and staff impacted by COVID-19 and liaison between nursing homes and the HSE COVID Response Teams (CRTs).

In addition, HIQA has used the information it holds about centres to support the Department of Health, the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and the HSE in terms of timely exchange of relevant information on regulated residential centres.

Where available information suggested that a small number of registered providers were not taking all necessary and expected action to ensure that residents received the best possible care the Chief Inspector engaged directly with the provider in the first place and if necessary utilised the legal enforcement framework available to her.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1063. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which families of patients and staff have had access to social workers throughout the Covid-19 pandemic with a view to the identification of possible challenges; and if he will make a statement on the

matter. [41712/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Tobacco Control Measures**

1064. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which his Department continues to monitor the effects of alternatives to tobacco smoking with particular reference to the need to ensure that alternatives do not lead to a return to tobacco smoking; if there have been any indications of an increase in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41713/21]

1065. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which his Department continues to monitor smoking trends with particular reference to any return to tobacco smoking which may or may not be attributable to alternatives; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41714/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1064 and 1065 together.

Adult smoking trends are monitored via the Healthy Ireland Survey each year in order to measure success against the objective of Tobacco Free Ireland (the national tobacco control policy) to achieve a smokefree Ireland by 2025. Overall smoking prevalence has declined by 6% between 2015 and 2019 indicating that increasing numbers of people are successfully quitting long-term.

In relation to relapse rates, the 2019 Survey identified that 46% of those who smoked in that year made an attempt to quit with 25% successfully quitting. The 2019 survey found that 52% of successful quitters did not use any quitting aids, with 38% using e-cigarettes and 10% using nicotine replacement therapies.

Trends regarding e-cigarette use are also monitored in the Healthy Ireland Survey. E-cigarette prevalence remains relatively low at 5% of the population and primarily consists of current and former smokers.

*Question No. 1065 answered with Question No. 1064.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1066. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his plans to review the ongoing attendance and visiting restrictions in hospitals; if the current HSE guidance will be reviewed to allow families and friends to visit their loved ones in hospitals; his position on the use of antigen testing to facilitate same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41716/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly.

### **Vaccination Programme**

1067. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if he will review a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied) relating to the vaccination of persons aged 16 and older; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41718/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Consent for vaccination is a process of communication between a healthcare worker and the person to whom the vaccine has been offered. A person should be provided with sufficient information on COVID-19 vaccination including the risks and benefits associated with the vaccine and in a format that they can understand. Some people may need additional support and time to consider the information and ask questions to enable them to come to a decision regarding vaccination.

The HSE has developed guidance to support healthcare staff providing care for young people (aged 16 and 17 years of age) as part of the national vaccination programme against COVID-19.

You can read this guidance at:

*[www.hse.ie/eng/health/immunisation/hcpinfo/covid19vaccineinfo4hps/guidance-on-consent-for-vaccination-16-17-years.pdf](http://www.hse.ie/eng/health/immunisation/hcpinfo/covid19vaccineinfo4hps/guidance-on-consent-for-vaccination-16-17-years.pdf)*

### **Hospital Facilities**

1068. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the situation relating to the helipad at a hospital (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41722/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Health Service Executive is responsible for the delivery of public healthcare infrastructure projects, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly in relation to this matter.

### **Hospital Staff**

1069. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health the total number of doctors in Mayo University Hospital currently and in 2020 including intern doctors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41728/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

1070. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Health the status of a hospital appointment for a person (details supplied). [41730/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Disability Services**

1071. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated current and capital cost of 100 additional residential places for persons with a disability. [41739/21]

1102. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated capital and current cost of an additional disability services residential place. [41777/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1071 and 1102 together.

As this is a service matter, I have asked referred the question to the HSE and asked that they respond to the Deputy directly.

### **Disability Services**

1072. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated costs of moving 360 persons a year out of congregated settings; and the ancillary costs for care. [41740/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Disability Services**

1073. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of 100,000 personal assistant hours. [41741/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Service Executive**

1074. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost to expand current HSE personalised budget demonstration project pilots for persons with disabilities to each CHO for 90 persons (details supplied). [41742/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** The remit of the Task Force on Personalised Budgets[1] was to make recommendations on a cost-neutral approach on a personalised budget model that will provide individuals with disabilities more control and choice in accessing health funded personal social services. Different approaches to the provision of personalised budgets are currently being piloted, and any decision to extend personalised budgets to a greater number of individuals, and the form that would take, will depend on the outcomes from the pilot project underway across all CHO areas and its evaluation.

A purely cost-neutral approach would not involve additional expenditure in terms of the actual Personalised Budgets themselves. It is estimated that around 37,000 people receive either a residential or a day service, Personal Assistance or Home Support, at a cost of around €1.95bn.

Providing 540 Personalised Budgets could involve the conversion of approximately 1.5% of that element of the Disability Services to Personalised Budgets, or a redeployment of around €30m of those funds. In a cost-neutral scenario, the ongoing costs of operating a Personalised Budget for the individual, such as dealing with matters like hiring, rosters, payroll administration, insurance, tax, and HR, would come from the individuals Personalised Budget.

However realistically any widescale deployment of Personalised Budgets would entail some overhead costs to the HSE in terms of staff to support applicants through the application process, use of a standardised Assessment Tool to assess the support needs of the individual, and transition and set-up costs to develop new systems. International experience, and Irish experience to date, suggests that many applicants may not proceed to a Personalised Budget, if they consider that the benefits of a personalised budget arrangement may be outweighed by factors like the ongoing administration involved for themselves in organising such arrangements. To reach 540 Personal Budgets in operation would involve processing significantly greater numbers of requests as a number of people may decide to opt out at various stages along the path.

Internationally, research across a number of jurisdictions suggests the uptake on Personalised Budgets is approximately 8%.

Pending the conclusion and evaluation of the existing Personalised Budgets pilot programme, it is not possible to say with any accuracy what the overhead costs of a more widespread provision of this option would be. However, it is likely to involve a national programme office, plus dedicated staffing in each CHO area to support applicants through the application and transition process and carry out needs assessments; licensing for a national standard assessment tool and software, and training in the use of same; support around unbundling of current funding; and communication support including a website, Easy to Read materials and ISL interpretation. Preliminary estimates suggest that such overhead costs could be of the order of €1.5m for a minimum national and local support service for supports to the applications process and making transitions to personal budgets, however the higher the volume of applications to reach a target 540 users, the higher those overheads would become.

[1] Towards Personalised Budgets for People with a Disability in Ireland – Report of the Taskforce on Personalised Budgets (2018)

### Care Services

1075. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of doubling existing respite hours; and the number of hours or days and nights that this would provide. [41743/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Care Services

1076. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of an additional respite hour, day and night, respectively. [41746/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as

soon as possible.

### **Care Services**

1077. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated capital cost of an additional respite house; the estimated cost of running it and the staffing requirements; and the number of hours or days and nights that an additional house would provide. [41747/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Care Services**

1078. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost to retain additional capacity for day services added for resumption of day services under Covid-19 restrictions and to fully staff this. [41748/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Care Services**

1079. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who avail on a 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 day-a-week basis of day services at peak since 1 January 2019, respectively. [41749/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Care Services**

1080. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost to fully meet demand for day services on pre-pandemic levels. [41750/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Staff**

1081. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of an additional dementia key worker. [41751/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services Staff

1082. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of an additional dementia advisor. [41752/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The estimated cost of a Dementia Advisor post, including pay and non-pay costs, is €64,753 per annum. In addition to these costs, it is reasonable to expect that there are other costs associated with the recruitment process which would be incurred by the employing agency, such as advertising, interview boards and possible travel expenses, which the HSE does not have sight of.

### Health Services Staff

1083. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of recruiting an additional dementia coordinator. [41753/21]

1095. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of 30 additional dementia advisors and key workers. [41766/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1083 and 1095 together.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Service Executive

1084. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of a 1% and 5% increase to the day care services current and capital budgets. [41754/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Service Executive

1085. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of refurbishing day care service centres in need of works. [41755/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Service Executive

1086. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of a 1% and 10% increase to HSE expenditure on day services on pre-pandemic levels. [41756/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a ser-

vice matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Disability Services**

1087. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost to move 100 adults with a disability aged under 65 from a nursing home to assisted living; and the breakdown of ancillary costs. [41757/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked referred the question to the HSE and asked that they respond to the Deputy directly.

### **Health Services Staff**

1088. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of 150 additional therapists for children's disability network teams. [41758/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Staff**

1089. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of 50 additional physiotherapist posts. [41759/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Staff**

1090. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of 50 additional occupational therapist posts. [41760/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Departmental Data**

1091. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of 50 additional speech and language therapist posts. [41761/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Departmental Data**

1092. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of 50 additional practice nurse posts. [41762/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

#### **Departmental Data**

1093. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of 50 additional public health nurse posts. [41763/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

#### **Departmental Data**

1094. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of 50 additional public-only general practitioners. [41764/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** General Practitioners are private practitioners, most of who hold contracts to provide medical services on behalf of the HSE to people with Medical Cards and GP Visit Cards and under various other schemes.

Under the General Medical Services (GMS) contract, GPs are reimbursed for a range of services they provide to medical card and GP visit card holders. GPs are remunerated for these services primarily on a capitation basis, with a range of additional support payments and fees for specific items of service.

The HSE does not directly hire GPs and there is no approved salary scale in the public service for a GP post. Equally, there is no appropriate measure of other costs required to ensure that a directly-employed GP could provide an adequate service (such as the cost of support staff, equipment costs, or other overheads). For this reason it is not possible to quantify the financial implications of directly hiring GPs to provide services to the public health system under the GMS and other schemes.

*Question No. 1095 answered with Question No. 1083.*

#### **Departmental Data**

1096. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated current and capital cost of five new palliative care beds and staffing. [41767/21]

1108. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated capital and current cost of a specialist palliative care bed. [41783/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1096 and 1108 together.

As the Deputy may be aware, to date specialist palliative care inpatient units have been constructed with funding raised by local voluntary organisations, while the HSE provides fit-out costs.

The units include space for the Palliative Community Homecare Team, Day Care, treatment rooms and pharmacy, family accommodation, kitchen and canteen, staff room, administration, education and meeting rooms and, where relevant, external groundworks/landscaping. It is not possible to provide an estimate of the cost specifically associated with each bed. However, as a guideline, it should be noted that the construction costs for a 15 bed unit average €10m, with fit-out costs in the region of €1.5m.

The revenue funding required to operate a 15 bed specialist palliative care inpatient unit is €3.8m per annum which equates to €253,000 per bed per year.

Finally, a 5 bed unit would not be considered as the staffing levels and related revenue costs would be prohibitive and maintaining a high level of clinical care would be very challenging. The locations for new inpatient units have been identified in line with national policy and the HSE's Palliative Care Development Framework 2017-2019, with units ranging from 15-36 beds.

### **Departmental Data**

1097. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of an additional psychologist for every CAMHS and primary care centre and number of posts. [41768/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Departmental Data**

1098. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of 276 additional psychologists. [41769/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Departmental Data**

1099. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost to increase investment in approved mental health centre capital works, site maintenance and upgrade works budget to €30 million. [41770/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Departmental Data**

1100. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost to provide a consistent 7-day week outpatient child and adolescent mental health services model. [41771/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a ser-

vice matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Departmental Data

1101. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of establishing a National Advocacy Service for mental health services users. [41773/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1102 answered with Question No. 1071.*

### Departmental Data

1103. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated capital and current cost of an older persons services long-stay bed. [41778/21]

1104. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated capital and current cost of an older persons services short-stay bed. [41779/21]

1105. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated capital and current cost to replace all privately provided older persons services short-stay beds with public beds. [41780/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1103, 1104 and 1105 together.

Several factors determine the capital cost of a community bed. These include the nature of the bed (day case, long-term stay, etc.), and the bed's location (within an existing facility, within a new extension to an existing facility, etc.). As such, there is no one capital cost for providing an additional bed.

A recent review of bed costings determined an average capital cost per bed to be in the region of:

Non Acute Bed - €0.35m to €0.45m

Acute Bed - €0.50m - €0.8m

Critical Care Bed - €1.40m to €1.80m

As some of these Parliamentary Questions relate to operational issues, they are a matter for the HSE. I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible. *Question No. 1104 answered with Question No. 1103. Question No. 1105 answered with Question No. 1103.*

### Departmental Data

1106. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated capital and current cost of a mental health approved centre bed. [41781/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Departmental Data**

1107. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated capital and current cost of a mental health community residence bed. [41782/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1108 answered with Question No. 1096.*

### **Departmental Data**

1109. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated capital and current cost of a social inclusion bed. [41784/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Departmental Data**

1110. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated capital and current cost to return rehabilitation bed and detox bed levels to pre-pandemic level peak. [41785/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Departmental Data**

1111. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated capital and current cost of reopening 120 rehabilitation beds. [41786/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Departmental Data**

1112. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated capital and current cost of reopening 48 detox beds. [41787/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** As this is a

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service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Departmental Data

1113. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated capital and current cost of a new rehabilitation bed. [41788/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Departmental Data

1114. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated capital and current cost of a new detox bed. [41789/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Covid-19 Pandemic

1115. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health if Fáilte Ireland guidelines precluding music at wedding receptions will be updated to reflect SI No. 385 of 2021 which allows music at weddings; if such regulation of human activities will cease; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41790/21]

1249. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Health when live music will return for indoor receptions in relation to public health guidelines for weddings; and if consideration has been given to using the Digital Covid Certificate system to facilitate this. [42204/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1115 and 1249 together.

As outlined in *COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting*, which was announced by Government on 31 August, live music is permitted at wedding receptions from 6 September. Guidance on weddings can be found here: <https://failtecdn.azureedge.net/failteireland/Guidelines-for-Re-opening-Hotels-and-Guesthouses.pdf>

Since the onset of the pandemic, we have saved lives and limited the impact of the disease on society in Ireland due to the huge effort of people across the country. Thanks to the hard work of the Irish people and the progress of our vaccination programme, we are now entering a new phase in the management of the pandemic. As our approach to the management of COVID-19 transitions from population wide restrictions to guidance we must continue to practice basic preventative behaviours, including in relation to self-isolation and restricting movements when advised, observing good respiratory and hand hygiene, physical distancing and mask wearing when appropriate.

*COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting* can be

found online: [www.gov.ie/en/press-release/f5291-post-cabinet-statement-covid-19-reframing-the-challenge-continuing-our-recovery-and-reconnecting/](http://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/f5291-post-cabinet-statement-covid-19-reframing-the-challenge-continuing-our-recovery-and-reconnecting/).

### Hospital Waiting Lists

1116. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which he is preparing plans to overhaul the various hospital and treatment waiting lists in respect of various elective procedures which have accumulated during the Covid-19 pandemic with a view to putting in place a realistic programme to enable the health services meet their requirements now and in the coming months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41791/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted in the last eighteen months as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic and more recently as a result of the ransomware attack. While significant progress was made in reducing waiting times from June 2020 onwards, the surge in Covid-19 cases in the first quarter of 2021 and the associated curtailment of acute hospital services, coupled with the ransomware attack of May 2021, has impacted waiting times. However, the HSE advise that acute services are now almost all fully restored to pre cyber-attack levels, and are operating in line with relevant Covid protocols.

My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) are focusing on improving access to elective care in order to reduce waiting times for patients. These plans include increased use of private hospitals, funding weekend and evening work in public hospitals, funding “see and treat” services where minor procedures are provided at the same time as outpatient consultations, providing virtual clinics and increasing capacity in the public hospital system.

An additional €240 million has been provided in Budget 2021 for an access to care fund, €210m of which has been allocated to the HSE and a further €30m to the NTPF. This is to be used to fund additional capacity to address the shortfall arising as a result of infection control measures taken in the context of COVID-19, as well as addressing backlogs in waiting lists.

My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are currently working on a Multiannual Waiting List Plan to address waiting lists and bring them in line with Sláintecare targets over the coming years.

### Primary Medical Certificates

1117. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the procedure to be followed to obtain a primary medical certificate; if there are any current delays in obtaining same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41793/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** The *Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers (Tax Concessions) Scheme* is underpinned by statute and comes under the remit of the Department of Finance and the Revenue Commissioners.

The extent of the involvement of Health Service Executive (HSE) Community Medical Doctors in the Scheme relates to making a professional clinical determination as to whether an individual applicant meets the specified medical criteria for a Primary Medical Certificate, which is a requirement for the Scheme.

The Deputy may be aware that following a Supreme Court decision of June 2020, the as-

assessment process for Primary Medical Certificates was suspended at the request of the Minister for Finance, Paschal Donohoe T.D.. Following the approval of the Finance Act 2020 which provides for the medical criteria in primary legislation, the Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, T.D., issued an instruction to the HSE to recommence assessments from 1st January, 2021.

The ability to hold assessments has been impacted by, among other things, the public health restrictions in place to suppress and manage the spread of COVID-19. Unfortunately there were delays in the processing of assessments due to the involvement of the HSE Medical Doctors in the national COVID-19 response and Schools Immunisation programme.

The HSE has confirmed that it is continuing to monitor the situation in the context of re-summing the range of services that are provided by Community Medical Doctors under the HSE Service Recovery and Restoration Plan, taking into account the pressures and challenges to the health services presented by COVID.

As the Deputy's question relates to a service matter, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the HSE for consideration and direct reply to the Deputy

### **Assisted Decision-Making**

1118. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Health when he expects the director of the decision support services to submit the code of practice in respect of Part 8 of the Assisted Decision-Making Capacity Act 2015 to him for approval and publication in view of the inordinate delay since December 2018; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41794/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Part 8 of the Assisted Decision Making (Capacity) Act 2015 provides a legislative framework for Advanced Healthcare Directives (AHDs). An AHD is a statement made by a person with capacity setting out his or her will and preferences regarding treatment decisions that may arise in the future when he or she no longer has capacity.

My Department remains committed to commencing these provisions as soon as possible. The development of a code of practice to accompany the AHD provisions is a key piece of work to facilitate commencement. The AHD multidisciplinary working group established by the Minister in 2016 has developed a code of practice for Part 8 and submitted it to the Director of Decision Support Services in December 2018 for consideration.

When the public consultation has taken place and the code of practice for Part 8 has been finalised by the Director it will be submitted to me for approval prior to publication.

### **Mental Health Services**

1119. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the breakdown of locations of CAHMS services across the State; and the operating hours for each service. [41795/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Mental Health Services**

1120. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the overall budget allocated to CAHMS in 2021; the budget allocated to each individual CAHMS; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41796/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Mental Health Services**

1121. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health if there are any restrictions for children referred to CAHMS after receiving the standard operating procedure instead of getting a diagnosis from the assessment of needs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41797/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Dental Services**

1122. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health the number of dentists in the dental treatment services scheme by LHO; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41799/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1123 answered with Question No. 1050.*

### **General Practitioner Services**

1124. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health when general practitioner care without fees will be extended to carers in receipt of the carer's support grant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41803/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I can advise the Deputy that many persons in receipt of the Carer's Support Grant already qualify for a GP visit card as the Carer's Support Grant is paid automatically to persons in receipt of Carer's Allowance or Carer's Benefit.

However, I note the Carer's Support Grant can also be paid to certain other carers providing full time care who may not be in receipt of the Carer's Allowance or Carer's Benefit.

The Deputy may be aware that the Programme for Government "Our Shared Future" contains a commitment to "Extend free GP care to carers in receipt of the Carer's Support Grant". It is noted that this commitment will be delivered over the lifetime of the Government.

### **Hospital Staff**

1125. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the status of the work undertaken to reopen the GMHS; the progress made to date regarding the recruitment of permanent staff at St James's Hospital, Meath primary care centre, St. Vincent's Private Hospital and the Mater Misericordiae University Hospital in order to resume new applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41811/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The Gay Men's Health Service (GMHS) reopened in January 2021, on a phased basis and in line with Government and HSE guidelines. With gradual increases in staffing and other additional resources, the GMHS has been able to incrementally expand the number of services offered during the course of 2021.

The GMHS PrEP service has recommenced and is seeing both new and returning service users. The Clinic's Consultant in Infectious Diseases (GMHS and GUIDE Clinic, St James's Hospital) and other doctors are providing virtual consultations, and PrEP service users attend GMHS for STI screening, blood testing and treatment as required.

Those with diagnosed STIs or requiring Hepatitis and/or HPV vaccine continue to be treated in GMHS also. A weekly STI clinic has commenced for symptomatic screening and treatment of both new and returning service users and, also, follow up for those who require further treatment or vaccinations. The GMHS Nurse led asymptomatic screening service has also been reinstated, following the recent HSE cyber-attack.

The closure of the GMHS in 2020 resulted from the pressures arising from the Covid-19 pandemic and related primarily to the necessary redeployment of increasing numbers of personnel to diverse COVID-19 related duties. Staff in the Gay Men's Health Service (GMHS) were reassigned, by reason of necessity, to other HSE services. Following the GMHS closure, significant efforts were made to maintain service provision through other locations, including the GUIDE Clinic in St. James' Hospital.

Prior to the pandemic, the GMHS was staffed by 97% agency staff; this is no longer the case. Funding for the PrEP programme allowed pro-rata recurring funding to be allocated to GMHS in 2020. As a result of pandemic related pressures on staffing, recruitment in 2020 initially focused on the services required to support the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, the HSE advises that a recruitment campaign to fill the posts for the GMHS PrEP programme commenced in the latter part of 2020 and is progressing well. 6 permanent posts in GMHS have been filled, with 3 still in recruitment phase. Furthermore, interviews for a permanent consultant position are expected to take place in September. IT improvements have also been put in place.

HSE Community Healthcare East advises that they have made every effort to restore, and maintain services as far as is possible, given current pandemic related pressures on resources.

All health services, including the GMHS, are continuing to face constraints, resulting from the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. It should be noted that, in order to ensure compliance with HSE Covid-19 safety measures, capacity at clinics is somewhat reduced.. Constraints include attendance by appointment only, or online as a result of the need to maintain social distancing.

The GMHS will continue to reinstate services on a phased basis and in line with the HSE's Safe Return to Work Guide. Officials from the Department of Health and HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme are in regular contact with CHO6 in order to monitor progress. It is hoped that it will be possible to increase capacity as recruitment progresses, vacci-

nation rates increase, and Covid-19 restrictions can safely be scaled back, in line with official guidelines.

The GMHS website is updated regularly, and provides full details of services available, as these are reinstated. It is hoped that GMHS services can be delivered to their full potential and developed further, once pandemic related constraints on health service capacity as a whole can be safely reduced.

HIV Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) is available, free of charge through the HSE, to those at substantial risk of acquiring HIV through sexual activity. PrEP is delivered through approved services that meet the National Standards for PrEP Service Delivery ([www.sexualwellbeing.ie/preproviders](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/preproviders)) and is being rolled out in a phased manner. There are currently thirteen public and nine private approved PrEP service providers in Ireland [www.sexualwellbeing.ie/getprep](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/getprep).

Funding of €5.4 million was secured for PrEP in 2020, including allocations for the recruitment of additional staff. Funding and roll-out of the programme continues in 2021.

Whilst the PrEP programme remains fully funded, implementation has been impacted as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. All health services, including STI/HIV/PrEP services, are continuing to face constraints, resulting from the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. These include attendance by appointment only, or online as a result of the need to maintain social distancing.

With regard to PrEP provision in Dublin, the HSE advise that two of the four Dublin based services have indicated that they currently need to limit new PrEP appointments. However, the other two services anticipate some additional capacity in the coming months. Of note, two large Dublin based services have reported an increase in the number of patients not attending their appointments, which has generated some extra capacity but an additional associated workload in determining the needs and wishes of those who have not attended for appointment.

The HSE has provided the following recruitment update with respect to PrEP:

Gay Men's Health Service: 6 permanent positions have been filled, 3 are still in recruitment phase, and a permanent consultant position is also in recruitment phase

GUIDE Clinic, St James' Hospital: All agreed PrEP posts have been recruited on a permanent basis (8 individuals with an aggregate whole time equivalent (WTE) of 4.32)

St Vincent's University Hospital: All agreed PrEP posts have been recruited on a permanent basis (4 individuals with a WTE of 3.0)

Mater Misericordiae University Hospital: All agreed PrEP posts have been recruited on a permanent basis (5 individuals with a WTE of 4.25), with the exception of part of the 0.5 WTE consultant post (a permanent 0.2 WTE is in place, the additional 0.3 WTE is under recruitment).

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1126. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the indicative timeframe for when the GMHS will fully reopen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41812/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The Gay Men's Health Service (GMHS) reopened in January 2021, on a phased basis and in line with Government and HSE guidelines. With gradual increases in staffing and other additional resources, the GMHS has been able to incrementally expand the number of services offered dur-

ing the course of 2021, and this process continues.

The GMHS PrEP service has recommenced and is seeing both new and returning service users. The Clinic's Consultant in Infectious Diseases (GMHS and GUIDE Clinic, St James's Hospital) and other doctors are providing virtual consultations, and PrEP service users attend GMHS for STI screening, blood testing and treatment as required.

Those with diagnosed STIs or requiring Hepatitis and/or HPV vaccine continue to be treated in GMHS also. A weekly STI clinic has commenced for symptomatic screening and treatment of both new and returning service users and, also, follow up for those who require further treatment or vaccinations. The GMHS Nurse led asymptomatic screening service has also been reinstated, following the recent HSE cyber-attack.

The closure of the GMHS in 2020 resulted from the pressures arising from the Covid-19 pandemic and related primarily to the necessary redeployment of increasing numbers of personnel to diverse COVID-19 related duties. Staff in the Gay Men's Health Service (GMHS) were reassigned, by reason of necessity, to other HSE services. Following the GMHS closure, significant efforts were made to maintain service provision through other locations, including the GUIDE Clinic in St. James' Hospital.

Prior to the pandemic, the GMHS was staffed by 97% agency staff; this is no longer the case. Funding for the PrEP programme allowed pro-rata recurring funding to be allocated to GMHS in 2020. As a result of pandemic related pressures on staffing, recruitment in 2020 initially focused on the services required to support the Covid-19 pandemic. However, a recruitment campaign to fill the posts for the GMHS PrEP programme commenced in the latter part of 2020 and is progressing well, with the recruitment of additional nurses underway. IT improvements have also been put in place.

HSE Community Healthcare East advises that they have made every effort to restore, and maintain services as far as is possible, given current pandemic related pressures on resources.

All health services, including the GMHS, are continuing to face constraints, resulting from the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. It should be noted that, in order to ensure compliance with HSE Covid-19 safety measures, capacity at clinics is somewhat reduced. Necessary constraints include attendance by appointment only, or online as a result of the need to maintain social distancing. Previous significant impacts have also included the redeployment of staff to necessary Covid-19 related duties, such as testing, contact tracing, vaccination or front-line patient care.

At present, the GMHS is continuing to reinstate services on a phased basis and in line with the HSE's Safe Return to Work Guide. Officials from the Department of Health and HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme are in regular contact with CHO6 in order to monitor progress. It is hoped that it will be possible to increase capacity as vaccination rates increase and as Covid-19 restrictions can safely be scaled back, in line with official guidelines.

The GMHS website is updated regularly, and provides full details of services available, as these are reinstated. It is hoped that GMHS services can be delivered to their full potential and developed further, once pandemic related constraints on health service capacity as a whole can be safely reduced.

## **Disability Services**

1127. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health if there is any delay in the roll-out

of progressing disabilities services programme in particular to (details supplied); the reason for the delay; and the impact that this will have on persons accessing these services. [41815/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1128. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if he has considered introducing a bonus for healthcare workers who worked on the frontlines of the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41818/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I wish to convey my sincere gratitude to all health sector workers in relation to their continuing efforts in the delivery of health services during this very challenging pandemic period.

Government have indicated their intention to recognise front-line healthcare workers in respect of the extraordinary contribution and commitment they have made in the management of the pandemic.

My Department and Government are considering the most appropriate means and timeline for such recognition, noting that the pandemic is ongoing.

### **Health Services**

1129. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health when the full range of support and required services will be provided in person to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41821/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Mental Health Services**

1130. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health when appropriate access to a psychologist will be provided in the case of a person (details supplied); when arrangements can be made for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41822/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Dental Services**

1131. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if an exception will be made in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41823/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Facilities**

1132. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health when he anticipates an options appraisal will be completed for the upgrade of the ICU at Mayo University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41830/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible

### **Hospital Facilities**

1133. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health when he anticipates an options appraisal will be completed for the 50-bed ward brief isolation rooms at Mayo University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41831/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Departmental Projects**

1134. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Health when the project on the development of a national diabetes register will recommence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41836/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In September 2019 Sláintecare Integration funding was allocated to the HSE to design and procure a National Diabetes Registry demonstrator product and develop a full specification plan for a National Diabetes Registry.

The development of a National Diabetes Registry will have a long-term benefit on

- Patient care by facilitating benchmarking of individual care against guideline recommendations and QI feedback to practitioners
- Provision of appropriate health services by providing reliable information to healthcare planners and policymakers.

This project was paused as it was dependent on the input and expertise of key HSE staff who were redeployed onto urgent on-going COVID-19 work. This project remains a priority and, subject to COVID-19, will be revisited in the future.

### **Departmental Meetings**

1135. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the meetings held by his departmental officials from assistant principal level upwards with representatives of the food industry in relation to the issue of infant nutrition in Ireland from 2016 to date, including the issue of infant formula; the dates of, attendees at and matters that were discussed at each meet-

ing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41840/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Department officials were involved in one meeting with industry representatives in relation to infant nutrition / infant formula during the period specified in the Deputy's question.

The meeting took place on 17 May 2016 with Food and Drink Industry Ireland (FDII)/ IBEC - now Dairy Industries Ireland (Aoife Moran and Conor Mulvihill), the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (Mary Flynn and Barbara Cronin) and the Department of Health (Tommy Wilson and Brid O'Higgins).

The meeting was held at FDII's request to discuss the European Commission's report on Young Child Formula (YCF) and the lack of any accompanying proposal for their specific regulation in the European Commission's revision of EU regulations on formulae products. FDII voiced its concerns that from July 2016, there would be no specific EU regulation governing YCF and that they would be considered a general food to be regulated under general food law.

### **State Bodies**

1136. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if a new healthy Ireland council is being established; if so, the way in which membership will be comprised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41843/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The recently published Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan 2021-2025 sets out in strategic action 1.4, under Governance and Policy for Healthy Ireland, to "Establish a second Healthy Ireland Council to provide intersectoral leadership to implement actions to realise the strategic outcomes of Healthy Ireland". In the timeframe for implementation actions, between 2021 and 2023, the plan also sets out a commitment to "Set out the terms of reference and the appropriate membership of the Healthy Ireland Council and convene the Council".

My officials are presently considering the broad purpose of the council and the resources required to manage and facilitate it. It is expected that a second Healthy Ireland Council will be established and will convene within the 2021 to 2023 timeframe.

*Question No. 1137 answered with Question No. 988.*

### **Hospital Services**

1138. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding Bantry General Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41846/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Facilities**

1139. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the number of rehabilitation and detox beds currently open respectively by facility in tabular form. [41849/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services

1140. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Health if consideration is being given to the establishment of a dedicated intestinal failure unit in Ireland; the assistance in place for those currently travelling to the United Kingdom for related treatments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41853/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Hospital Waiting Lists

1141. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health his views on reports of the inability to perform scans at St. James's Hospital in Dublin; the manner in which this is impacting both the treatment of individual patients awaiting scans and the management of ward beds; the waiting times for scans in St. James's Hospital; the impact of such waiting times on hospital bed usage; when this situation be resolved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41855/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Abortion Services

1142. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health the companies or organisations that provide prenatal diagnostic testing to women accessing abortion in Ireland; if Irish general practitioners or hospitals use prenatal diagnostic screening tests by a group (details supplied); if his attention has been drawn to the fact that it has recently become a matter of public record that the group is allegedly using these test results from other jurisdictions to collect the genetic data of women and their unborn children and maintaining this on a genetic database of the Government of China; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41856/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this relates to service matters, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Mental Health Services

1143. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health when the full range of supports, including primary care psychology support, will be made available to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41860/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## **Health Services**

1144. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter regarding the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41864/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1145 answered with Question No. 1054.*

## **Hospital Appointments Status**

1146. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if an appointment will be provided to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41867/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## **Departmental Reviews**

1147. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health the progress on the long-term review examining the existing clinical placement allowances payable to student nurses and midwives on supernumerary clinical placement that was conducted by a person (details supplied); the timeline for the implementation of the review's recommendations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41868/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy will be aware, I directed that a longer-term independent review of student nurse and midwife clinical placement allowances take place. The review was conducted by Mr Sean McHugh and while the HSE cyberattack delayed its progress, Mr McHugh submitted his report for my consideration on the 6th of August. The DoH is currently reviewing the report and Mr. McHugh's recommendations. When this review is completed, the Department will then confirm its approach to this matter, including questions over implementation and publication.

## **Health Strategies**

1148. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health the progress made by his Department to date in relation to the recommendations of the Joint Committee on Health's Report on addressing Vitamin D deficiency as a public health measure in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41870/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The Joint Committee on Health's report on addressing vitamin D deficiency as a public health measure has four recommendations and my Department is responsible for delivering on the first two recommendations.

Recommendation (1). With regard to recommending daily Vitamin D supplements to the entire adult population, the current policy advice on vitamin D supplementation is aimed at three population groups; infants, 1-4 year old children and all adults 65 years and over.

Recommendation (2). Regarding vitamin D supplementation of the entire population, my Department has requested the Scientific Committee of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland to review the evidence on this and provide me with recommendations. This is the process used by my Department to ensure evidence- based advice.

Once the Food Safety Authority of Ireland recommendations are received, we will develop a public health policy to increase knowledge and encourage increased intake of Vitamin D through supplementation, if appropriate.

Recommendation (3). The issue of reducing the cost of Vitamin D supplementation by re-considering the current VAT rate applied is a matter for the Department of Finance.

Recommendation (4). The issue of specific measures being put in place for frontline and healthcare workers is a matter for the HSE and my Department have referred this to HSE for direct reply to the Deputy.

### Health Services

1149. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health when arrangements for assisted living and sheltered accommodation will be provided in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41872/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services

1150. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health when a new drugs payment scheme card will issue to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41873/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Vaccination Programme

1151. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health the additional resources he will make available in order to provide HPV vaccination options to secondary schools for those not vaccinated in the 2020-2021 term considering the figures to date which show a considerable reduction on the uptake in the previous two years; the way students from low income families can still avail of the vaccine without having to pay for it privately in cases in which the vaccination was missed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41876/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The immunisation programme in Ireland is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The Committee's recommendations are based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international best practice in relation to immunisation. It makes recommendations on vaccination policy to my Department. The NIAC continues to revise recommendations to allow for the introduction of new vaccines in Ireland and to keep abreast of changes in the patterns of

disease. Therefore, the immunisation schedule will continue to be amended over time.

The ages at which vaccines are recommended in the immunisation schedule are chosen by the 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 first year of secondary school to provide maximum coverage. All vaccines administered through the School Immunisation Programme are provided free of charge.

My Department will continue to be guided by 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.

Anyone not in 1st year of secondary school or age equivalent in special schools or home schooled during the 2020/2021 school year who wishes to get the HPV vaccine, must go to their GP or sexual health clinic and pay privately for the vaccine and its administration. This applies to everyone whether or not they have a medical card/GP visit card, as it is outside of the HPV immunisation programme.

The uptake rate for the first dose of the HPV vaccine, in the 2020/2021 academic year, is 72% as of 17 August 2021, and this figure is expected to increase because data input on vaccine uptake is ongoing. The HSE expects the HPV vaccination programme for 2020/2021 to be substantially complete before the start of the 2021/2022 academic year.

### **Vaccination Programme**

1152. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the options available to a person who had a severe reaction to their first Covid-19 vaccine (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41877/21]

1163. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health if a policy of exemption to the EU Digital COVID Certificate will be formulated and applied for persons who cannot be vaccinated for medical reasons or in cases of an adverse reaction to the first dose of a vaccine which medically prevents them from having the second dose given the option of having a Covid-19 test each time they wish to have a cup of coffee or a meal indoors is not practical, workable or affordable for them; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41905/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1152 and 1163 together.

The EU Digital COVID Certificate is proof that a person has either been vaccinated against COVID-19 or received a negative COVID-19 test result or recovered from COVID-19 in the last 6 months.

While the EU Digital COVID Certificate initiative can support safe travel within the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic it is not a precondition for travel.

Individuals who have received one vaccination dose can request a certificate of this dose through the online Digital COVID Certificate portal

### **Health Service Executive**

1153. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health the total amount spent to date by the HSE in rebuilding systems after the cyber-attack; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41879/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Waiting Lists**

1154. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health the average wait time for orthopaedic treatment nationally; the average waiting for orthopaedic treatment for County Mayo; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41880/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted in the last eighteen months as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic and more recently as a result of the ransomware attack. While significant progress was made in reducing waiting times from June 2020 onwards, the surge in Covid-19 cases in the first quarter of 2021 and the associated curtailment of acute hospital services, coupled with the ransomware attack of May 2021, has impacted waiting times. However, the HSE advise that acute services are now almost all fully restored to pre cyber-attack levels, and are operating in line with relevant Covid protocols.

My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) are focusing on improving access to elective care in order to reduce waiting times for patients. These plans include increased use of private hospitals, funding weekend and evening work in public hospitals, funding “see and treat” services where minor procedures are provided at the same time as outpatient consultations, providing virtual clinics and increasing capacity in the public hospital system.

An additional €240 million has been provided in Budget 2021 for an access to care fund, €210m of which has been allocated to the HSE and a further €30m to the NTPF. This is to be used to fund additional capacity to address the shortfall arising as a result of infection control measures taken in the context of COVID-19, as well as addressing backlogs in waiting lists.

My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are currently working on a Multiannual Waiting List Plan to address waiting lists and bring them in line with Sláintecare targets over the coming years.

In relation to average waiting times, the NTPF has advised that the health system does not collect the data necessary to calculate average wait times. In particular, the time to treatment

of patients who have already received their care is not collected. The NTPF collects data on patients currently on the waiting list and the average time that these patients have been waiting is provided here.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq1154-09-09-21\_en.xlsx ">orthopaedics</a>]

## Hospital Services

1155. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the closure of applications for the pre-exposure prophylaxis scheme in a number of hospitals (details supplied); the steps he is taking to address this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41881/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** Since November 2019, HIV Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) is available, free of charge through the HSE, to those at substantial risk of acquiring HIV through sexual activity. PrEP is delivered through approved services that meet the National Standards for PrEP Service Delivery and is being rolled out in a phased manner. There are currently thirteen public and nine private approved PrEP service providers in Ireland [www.sexualwellbeing.ie/getprep](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/getprep).

The roll-out of the national PrEP programme was a significant landmark in the implementation of the *National Sexual Health Strategy, 2015-2020*. Funding of €5.4 million was secured for PrEP in 2020, including allocations for the recruitment of additional staff. Funding and roll-out of the programme continues in 2021.

Whilst the PrEP programme remains fully funded, implementation has been impacted as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. All health services, including STI/HIV/PrEP services, are continuing to face constraints, resulting from the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. These include attendance by appointment only, or online as a result of the need to maintain social distancing, and the necessary redeployment of personnel to diverse COVID-19 related duties, which include testing, contact tracing, vaccination and front-line patient care.

However, despite Covid-19 related restrictions, the national PrEP programme has continued to expand. At the end of Q1 2021, there was a total of 2,995 persons registered and clinically approved for reimbursement. Data for Q2 2021 is awaited, but has been delayed owing to the recent cyber-attack.

-	Q4 2019	Q1 2020	Q2 2020	Q3 2020	Q4 2020	Q1 2021
Number of new individuals registered for PrEP	658	674	301	502	547	313

Despite significant service restrictions in 2020/21 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, PrEP services continued to see new and review existing PrEP service users. Many services adapted how they worked, delivering some care on a virtual platform.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the HSE SHCPP has been in regular communication with public STI/PrEP services and community partners, and is working together with HIV Ireland to maintain an updated list of service availability. Information for users on how to access services is available here, [www.hivireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/Sexual-Health-Service-Restrictions.pdf](http://www.hivireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/Sexual-Health-Service-Restrictions.pdf).

Services have been working hard to restore and increase service capacity throughout 2021 notwithstanding the challenges faced by the ongoing pandemic, the recent cyber-attack and,

most recently, a national Early Infectious Syphilis outbreak.

I advised by the HSE that while two of the four Dublin based services have indicated that they currently need to limit new PrEP appointments, the other two services anticipate some additional capacity in the coming months. Of note, two large Dublin based services have reported an increase in the number of patients not attending their appointments, which has generated some extra capacity but an additional associated workload in determining the needs and wishes of those who have not attended for appointment.

Service users seeking appointments in Dublin should continue to visit service websites for updates on availability or endeavour to contact services to obtain an appointment or be put on a waiting list for an appointment. The full list of approved PrEP services and contact details is available on [www.sexualwellbeing.ie/getprep](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/getprep).

Service users are advised to use condoms while they are awaiting an appointment. Condoms are available for free from a range of settings including public STI clinics; NGO and community organisations; and third level institutions, through the National Condom Distribution Service. For more information, please see the 2020 NCDS activity report here: <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/health-and-wellbeing/national-condom-distribution-service.pdf>

Regular STI testing is an integral part of care for those taking HIV PrEP. The current availability of free online testing for those in Dublin, Wicklow, Kildare, Cork and Kerry has increased STI testing access. Information on STIs, testing, safer sex and HIV prevention is available on <https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/>.

Needless to say, funding remains in place for the national PrEP programme and it is hoped that this service can be delivered to its full potential and developed further, once pandemic related constraints on the health service as a whole can be reduced safely.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

1156. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of surgery for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41885/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

1157. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) can expect an appointment. [41888/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any

individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

1158. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) can expect an appointment. [41889/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

1159. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) can expect an appointment. [41893/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

1160. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding the future of Sruthan House, Dundalk, County Louth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41897/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

1161. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of a service (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41902/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked

the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services

1162. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of a service (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41903/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1163 answered with Question No. 1152.*

### Health Services Staff

1164. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health the position with regard to the harm reduction worker who was assigned to the Drogheda area in 2020 to manage the concerning lack of needle exchange provided by the HSE in the area; the reasons for this absence; if any other relevant details will be provided in relation to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41911/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1165 answered with Question No. 1022.*

### Health Strategies

1166. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the amount of the €23 million announced in Budget 2021 for Sharing the Vision that has been released to the HSE to date; if a full breakdown will be provided of the way the €23 million has been spent to date in tabular form; if any of the funding has been used to fund existing levels of service.; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41920/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** Of the €23 million allocated to commence implementation of many of the short-term recommendations of *Sharing the Vision* in 2021, €2.773 million has been released to the HSE. This funding has enabled the HSE to progress initiatives agreed in the National Service Plan 2021 and *Sharing the Vision*, including the peer support programme, individual placement support, development of the national clinical programme for early intervention psychosis, DBT programme and the recruitment of a bereavement co-ordinator under *Connecting for Life*, the National Strategy to Reduce Suicide.

Proposals involving a further €6.223 million in expenditure are under consideration in my Department with a view to being released as soon as possible.

I am happy to confirm that the funding allocated for new developments is being used solely for new developments. Much of the funding is for new posts and it is envisaged the majority will be filled in quarter three and quarter four of this year.

I would note that Covid-19 and the cyber-attack have negatively impacted the HSE's capac-

ity to progress work on new developments but I would assure the Deputy that I am, along with the Department and HSE, fully committed to implementing the new developments as soon as possible.

### **Departmental Expenditure**

1167. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the amount that was spent in 2020 to expand the provision of talking therapy in Ireland; his plans to continue to increase access to talking therapies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41921/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Vaccination Programme**

1168. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the consideration he has given to persons who, for medical reasons, cannot receive a first and or second dose of the Covid-19 vaccine; the steps he will take to ensure they are not unfairly discriminated against in the rollout of the Digital Covid Certificate or in the return to workplaces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41929/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The EU Digital COVID Certificate is proof that a person has either been vaccinated against COVID-19 or received a negative COVID-19 test result or recovered from COVID-19 in the last 6 months.

While the EU Digital COVID Certificate initiative can support safe travel within the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic it is not a precondition for travel.

### **Hospital Staff**

1169. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the details of the current vacancies in CUH in tabular form; if they have been advertised; and the length of time they have been vacant. [41936/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Departmental Data**

1170. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Health the payments made by large pharmaceutical companies based in Ireland in the past five years; the amounts involved in these payments; and the purpose of the payments. [41939/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I am not aware of my Department receiving payments from large pharmaceutical companies based in Ireland in the past five years.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1171. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter regarding vaccination centres (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41945/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Departmental Policies

1172. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health the measures he is taking to promote or facilitate remote working for staff in his Department or bodies under the aegis of his Department; the costs this has generated in terms of the provision of laptops, desktop computers or contributions to wi-fi costs or phone-related expenses; the number of staff who have applied for permission to work from home on a permanent or hybrid-model basis (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41955/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The staff in my Department and in the agencies under the aegis of my Department are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible.

#### Post-Covid Blended Working Framework

A central framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

Senior human resources staff and CEOs of the agencies under the aegis of my Department have been kept fully briefed in respect of the development of the Civil Service Framework and the shift towards blended working patterns for the post-Covid era. It is intended that the public sector, including the agencies under the aegis of my Department, will develop their own blended working policies based on the principles set out in the Blended Working Framework for the post-Covid era when it is agreed.

My Department has established an internal Blended Working Group involving key Corporate functional areas which is examining the practical implications of facilitating blended working by staff in the Department of Health. This will be ongoing over the coming months and will take account of central framework on remote working from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. An application process for blended working will be put in place for the staff of my Department and the public health sector staff in due course.

Over the past 3 years my Department has had a rolling programme in place to issue all staff with a personal laptop, as opposed to a desktop device. These devices are used in the office and are also in use by staff as they work remotely at present. For health and safety reasons, staff have been facilitated in bringing home some other equipment from the office, e.g. office chairs and peripheral ICT equipment such as a keyboard, mouse and external monitor, to provide for an ergonomically appropriate work-station as they are required to work remotely.

In line with Department of Public Expenditure and Reform Guidance on working arrangements during COVID-19 for the Civil and Public Service, it has been decided that public service employers should not pay a daily allowance to their employees in respect of working from home. My Department does not pay broadband or phone costs for staff, other than the normal

arrangements where a mobile phone is provided on an identified business need. It is open to employees to make claims directly from Revenue in respect of actual costs incurred in working from home at the end of the relevant tax year, in accordance with relevant Revenue rules. Any claim in this regard is solely a matter for the individual concerned.

In respect of costs in the agencies under the aegis of my Department, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter. The information has been sought from the Non-Commercial State Agencies, and once collated, will be provided by way of separate letter to the Deputy.

In line with the Government campaign - #MakingRemoteWork – I am supportive of facilitating all reasonable and practical applications for blended working, while ensuring the continued effective and efficient delivery of the Department's business.

### **Ambulance Service**

1173. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the under-resourcing of the Athlone ambulance service in the context of a town of its size and the huge area it serves; his plans to increase staffing resources for the service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41965/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to reply to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Staff**

1174. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to recruitment issues in the homecare sector; if he is taking steps to address the issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41966/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Services**

1175. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if there are hospitals in which cardiac rehabilitation phase III is not operational in view of the strong evidence base for cardiac rehabilitation and the need for equitable and timely access to cardiac rehabilitation for all eligible patients living in Ireland; if so, the hospitals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41970/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Services**

1176. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if there are hospitals in which eligible patients for cardiac rehabilitation phase III are still waiting in view of the strong evi-

dence base for cardiac rehabilitation and the need for equitable and timely access to cardiac rehabilitation for all eligible patients living in Ireland; the reasons for persons not being referred or being seen for such rehabilitation; if these problems have only occurred since the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41971/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Tax Code**

1177. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the evaluation currently underway of the sugar-sweetened drinks tax; when details of the tax are due to be completed and published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41982/21]

1181. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the evaluation currently underway of the sugar-sweetened drinks tax; when details of the tax are due to be completed and published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42020/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1177 and 1181 together.

The Sugar-Sweetened Drinks Tax was introduced on 1st May 2018, and has now been in operation for more than three years. The introduction of the tax was an important action in the Obesity Policy and Action Plan, with the aim of combatting obesity through reducing consumption of added sugar in drinks and encouraging reformulation of products by the drinks industry.

Initial indications are that the tax has had a positive impact, particularly in terms of encouraging drinks producers to reduce the sugar content in their products. However, a more comprehensive analysis of the effects of the tax is needed, and the Department has commenced an evaluation of the measure.

The first step in this process was to look at existing examples that could inform the methodology to assess the impacts of the tax. This work is well advanced. The literature review and data scoping exercise will enable the Department to make an assessment of the potential approaches to evaluate the impact of the tax and the timelines and resources required for the evaluation. It is intended that the evaluation will be published when completed.

*Question No. 1178 answered with Question No. 953.*

### **Health Services**

1179. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the supports that are in place for persons who suffer with agoraphobia; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42017/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Healthcare Policy**

1180. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if he plans to adjust the blood

transfusion policy regarding men who have sex with men in line with evidence-based practice as has recently occurred in the North and in Britain; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42019/21]

1188. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health the position on the abolition of the current ban on gay and bisexual men donating blood and the introduction of an individualised risk assessment system for all prospective donors similar to that now in place in Britain and Northern Ireland; when this will happen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42047/21]

1223. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Health if his Department will move to abolish the current ban on gay and bisexual men donating blood and the introduction of an individualised risk assessment system for all prospective donors, similar to that now in place in the UK and Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42113/21]

1234. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health his views on the introduction of an individualised risk assessment system which is not based on gender and sexuality for all prospective blood donors by the end of 2021, similar to that now in place in Britain and Northern Ireland since 16 August 2021. [42160/21]

1307. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 1195 of 31 March 2021, the status of the review of the 12-month blood donation ban for gay men, bisexual men, transgender men and men who have sex with men; if an individual risk-based assessment is still under consideration; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42409/21]

1313. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if work is underway to end the restrictions on gay men donating blood; the steps he has taken to address this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42428/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1180, 1188, 1223, 1234, 1307 and 1313 together.

The remit of the Irish Blood Transfusion Service (IBTS) is to provide a safe, reliable and robust blood service to the Irish health system. A major objective of the IBTS is to ensure that it always has the necessary programmes and procedures in place to protect both the recipients and the donors of blood and blood products. The IBTS constantly keeps all deferral policies under active review, in the light of scientific evidence, emerging infections and international evidence, to ensure the ongoing safety of blood and the products derived from it.

The IBTS lifted its lifelong ban on men who have sex with men (MSM) from donating blood in January 2017, when the deferral policy was reduced to a period of one year following their last sexual encounter with a man. My Department has established a post-implementation surveillance monitoring group, which is scheduled to meet later this week. The group will assess the impact, if any, on the incidence of transfusion transmitted infections, following the change to donor deferral policies in 2017. The output of this Group will contribute to the evidence base that can inform future decisions on proposed changes to deferral policies, including any future changes to MSM deferral policy.

The IBTS established an independent ‘Advisory Committee for Social Behaviours Review’ to review the evidence base for donor selection, deferral and exclusion in Ireland in relation to social behaviours that may increase the risk of acquiring specific blood-borne infections. The Advisory Committee aims to conclude its work in September 2021 and submit its report to the IBTS for consideration. My Department will be engaging with the IBTS during the course of

this work.

*Question No. 1181 answered with Question No. 1177.*

### **Vaccination Programme**

1182. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the way a person who was vaccinated abroad can receive a digital Covid pass (details supplied) which is readable in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42022/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Following the successful rollout of the initial implementation phase of the EU Digital COVID Certificate in Ireland, the Government is creating a specific portal to enable Irish citizens vaccinated outside of the EU, with vaccines authorised for use in Ireland, to obtain a COVID certificate valid in Ireland and across the EU.

This portal is currently being advanced on a cross departmental basis involving technical and process development, and resource management. It is expected that this portal will be launched in the coming weeks on a phased basis.

### **Health Service Executive**

1183. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health if it is current HSE hospital policy to carry out PCR tests on the deceased; the names of all hospitals that have carried out PCR tests on the deceased; the numbers of tests carried out on the deceased; the reason a PCR test would be carried out on a deceased citizen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42027/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1184. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the current restrictions on indoor addiction recovery support groups; and the timeline for the lifting of same. [42033/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The majority of indoor activities are still restricted given the current high level of Covid-19 infection. However, the Dept of Health has supported the continued operation of drug and alcohol support groups and treatment programmes given their importance for the health and wellbeing of participants. It is committed to continue to provide bespoke guidance for this important health sector.

The Department has advised that the maximum number of participants in drug and alcohol support groups and treatment programmes can be increased from 15 to 20, to include organisers. This higher limit is subject to 2 metre social distancing in the venue.

A further increase in the maximum number of participants will be considered on foot of the Government roadmap to further re-open social and economic activities, which was recently published.

The following guidance should be taken into account in increasing the number of participants in support groups and programmes:

- All participants should be encouraged to available of the Covid-19 vaccination. Vaccination will not alone protect them from the impact of the disease, but will protect other participants in support groups and programme. Vaccination is an important contribution to social solidarity.

- The Delta variant of Covid-19 is highly infectious and poses a major risk to the population, in particular those who are not vaccinated. Public health advice remains that the non-vaccinated should avoid congregated indoor settings. Other meeting formats - outdoors and online - should continue to be provided.

- People living with drug and alcohol addictions may experience poor physical health and weakened immune systems, making them especially vulnerable to Covid-19. Participants who are vaccinated may continue to face these heightened risks due to weakened immune systems.

- Masks remain an important protective measure for everyone, including those that are fully vaccinated. Good ventilation of indoor venues is also imperative.

I appreciate the positive engagement by drug and alcohol support groups with the Department on this matter and their patience as we sought clarification on what was possible given the continuing public health restrictions.

My officials will continue to engage with these group to further increase attendance at indoor meetings, in line with the Government roadmap.

### **Pension Provisions**

1185. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that retirees from the HSE who are members of the public service pension scheme and are paid their pension fortnightly by way of interim payments have been advised that this practice is to cease; the number of persons impacted by this decision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42035/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Pension Provisions**

1186. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that retirees from the HSE who are members of the public service pension scheme and who receive fortnightly payments by way of an interim payment have been advised that this practice is to be discontinued; the legal basis on which this decision has been taken; if consideration will be given to allowing the persons in receipt of this interim payment arrangement to continue on a red circled basis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42036/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Medicinal Products**

1187. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health his views on a matter (details

supplied) regarding a case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42046/21]

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

I fully appreciate the desire of patients to access all potential treatments for their condition as soon as possible. However, Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars me as the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

In line with the 2013 Health Act and the national framework agreed with industry, a company must submit an application to the HSE to have a new medicine added to the reimbursement list. Reimbursement is for licenced indications which have been granted market authorisation by the European Medicines Agency or the Health Products Regulatory Authority. In making a relevant reimbursement decision, the HSE is required under the Act to have regard to a number of criteria including efficacy, the health needs of the public, cost effectiveness and potential or actual budget impact. HSE decisions on which medicines are reimbursed by the taxpayer are made on objective, scientific and economic grounds, on the advice of the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics (NCPE). The HSE has advised that on 8 March 2021 it received an application for the reimbursement of Cemiplimab (Libtayo) for the treatment of adult patients with metastatic or locally advanced cutaneous squamous cell carcinoma (mCSCC or laCSCC) who are not candidates for curative surgery or curative radiation. On 31 March, following the completion by the NCPE of a rapid review, the HSE commissioned a full health technology assessment (HTA) with respect to this indication, as per agreed processes. When completed, the HTA report will be an important input into the decision-making processes of the HSE. The HSE Executive Management Team is the decision-making body for the reimbursement of medicines under the Health Act 2013 and it will, following receipt of the outcome of the Drugs Group's deliberations, make the decision on whether Cemiplimab will be reimbursed.

*Question No. 1188 answered with Question No. 1180.*

### **Special Educational Needs**

1189. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the number of children waiting for early intervention services by service in County Tipperary; the average waiting time; the efforts being made to reduce these waiting lists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42051/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Admissions**

1190. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients attending hospitals with strokes to date in 2021 and in each year for the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42058/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Hospital Admissions

1191. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients attending hospitals with blood clots to date in 2021 and in each year for the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42059/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Hospital Admissions

1192. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients attending hospitals requiring cardiac care to date in 2021 and in each year for the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42060/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Covid-19 Pandemic

1193. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding the removal of yoga studios from class exemptions during level 3 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42072/21]

1228. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health when yoga studios will be allowed to re-open (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42131/21]

1247. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health when yoga instruction and classes will be permitted to reopen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42201/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1193, 1228 and 1247 together.

As outlined in *COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting*, which was announced by Government on 31 August, organised indoor group activities including sports and dance classes can take place from 20 September with capacity limits of 100 people (with appropriate protective measures) where all patrons are immune (fully vaccinated or recovered from COVID-19 within previous 6 months) or accompanied minors (under 18). Where patrons have mixed immunity status, pods of up to 6 participants will be permitted with multiple pods permitted subject to protective measures.

Based on the criteria of at or close to 90% of people 16 or over being fully vaccinated and having regard to the incidence and behaviour of the disease at that time, from 22 October onwards remaining restrictions on indoor sports activities and other indoor leisure/community activities and certification of immunity or testing as a prerequisite for access to, or engagement in, any activities or events (with exception of international travel) will be lifted.

Since the onset of the pandemic, we have saved lives and limited the impact of the disease on society in Ireland due to the huge effort of people across the country. Thanks to the hard work of the Irish people and the progress of our vaccination programme, we are now entering a new phase in the management of the pandemic. As our approach to the management of COVID-19 transitions from population wide restrictions to guidance we must continue to practice

basic preventative behaviours, including in relation to self-isolation and restricting movements when advised, observing good respiratory and hand hygiene, physical distancing and mask wearing when appropriate.

*COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting* can be found online: [www.gov.ie/en/press-release/f5291-post-cabinet-statement-covid-19-reframing-the-challenge-continuing-our-recovery-and-reconnecting/](http://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/f5291-post-cabinet-statement-covid-19-reframing-the-challenge-continuing-our-recovery-and-reconnecting/)

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1194. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the total spending and the breakdown of spending on the Covid-19 response since March 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42073/21]

### **Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): COVID-19 Expenditure 2020**

The budget allocation for spending on COVID-19 measures by the Department of Health through the HSE in 2020 was €2,511m (comprising €2,291m current and €220m capital).

The HSE's allocation for COVID-19 measures in 2020 of €2,511m included: €920m for personal protective equipment; €330m for private hospital capacity; €292m for COVID-19 testing & contact tracing; €190m for acute hospitals; €140m for GP services; €80m for the Temporary Payment Assistance Scheme for private nursing homes; €76m for payment of student nurses and medical interns; €45m for accommodation and isolation facilities; €218m for other current measures including community costs, disability services, hospices, the National Ambulance Service and other miscellaneous supports; and €220m for capital measures including €125m for buildings and related equipment, €45m for other equipment, €32m for ventilators and €18m for ICT.

The actual COVID-19 related expenditure incurred in 2020 was in line with these budget allocations.

### **COVID-19 Expenditure 2021**

The budget allocation for spending on COVID-19 measures by the Department of Health through the HSE in 2021 is €1,831m (comprising €1,676m current and €155m capital). In addition to this allocation, a contingency fund of €240m held by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is available to be re-allocated to the HSE for COVID-related measures if required, bringing the total funding available to the HSE in 2021 to €2,071m. A further amount of €50m has been allocated to the Department of Health for non-HSE related COVID expenditure in 2021, bringing the total allocation for all COVID-related measures in 2021 to €2,121m.

The HSE's allocation for COVID-19 measures in 2021 of €1,831m includes: €450m for personal protective equipment; €200m for the COVID vaccination programme; €445m for testing & contact tracing (excluding €205m available from DPER contingency if required); €210m for the Access to Care Fund; €42m for the Temporary Payment Assistance Scheme for private nursing homes; €329m for other current measures including home care, mental health supports, disability services, cancer restoration services, homelessness services, GP costs, hospices and infection prevention & control; and €155m for capital measures includes €130m for building, equipping and furnishing of health facilities and €25m for ICT.

An estimate of the actual COVID-19 related expenditure incurred by the HSE in 2021 to date is reported regularly to the Department. The latest estimated weekly expenditure data to 6

August 2021 indicates that of the HSE's €1,831m COVID allocation, the spend to date is as follows: €173m for personal protective equipment; €177m for the COVID vaccination programme (spend to end June); €357m for testing & contact tracing; €86m for the Private Hospital Safety Net 2 Agreement; €40m for the Temporary Assistance Payment Scheme to support private nursing homes; €23m for Infection Prevention & Control; €408m for other current measures including acute hospitals supports, home care, mental health supports, disability services, cancer restoration services, homelessness services, GP costs, hospices; and €65m for capital costs. As noted, these figures are estimates of expenditure based on the latest available information which is subject to change.

The non-HSE related allocation of €50m for COVID measures held by the Department includes: €30m for the National Treatment Purchase Fund; €10m for costs related to the ePassenger Locator Form; €5.0m for the Healthy Ireland programme; and €5.0m for HIQA's Nursing Home Expert Review in relation to the COVID-19 response. The Department incurred costs of approximately €9m to end June 2021. The contingency fund of €240m held by DPER has not yet been drawn down.

### **Healthcare Policy**

1195. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the details of all of the increased bed and ICU capacity delivered since March 2020; the number of additional healthcare staff employed by the HSE since 2020; the efforts made to reduce pressure on bed capacity facing winter 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42074/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Winter Plan 2020/2021 and Budget 2021 provided €236 million in revenue and €40 million in capital expenditure for additional beds on a permanent basis in our acute hospitals. This will add 1,146 general acute beds to the hospital system over the number available on 1 January 2020. To date, 834 of these acute beds and 73 additional sub-acute beds have been provided under the Winter Plan. Delivery of additional beds and other measures in the Winter Plan is dependent on recruitment of appropriate staff, procurement of IT systems, delivery of physical infrastructure, developing new integrated ways of working and appropriate leadership and governance arrangements.

At the start of last year, permanent adult critical care capacity in Ireland stood at 255 beds, according to the National Office of Clinical Audit. Funding for a further 40 adult critical care beds was provided on a temporary basis in March 2020 as part of the response to Covid-19 in March 2020.

A Strategic Plan for Critical Care was noted by Government in December 2020. This Plan aims to increase capacity to 321 by end-2021 and to 446 in the longer term. Funding of €52m provided for 2021 will see the 40 beds provided in 2020 retained permanently and a further 26 added, to bring permanent baseline capacity to 321 by the end of 2021. The HSE has advised that 41 of these 66 beds are now in place, with the number open on any particular day fluctuating as a result of a variety of factors.

Budget 2021 provided funding for a large increase in the number of healthcare staff employed in the public health service. From the end of 2020 to the end of July 2021, there has been an increase of 4,361 whole-time equivalent healthcare staff, with the largest growth in Nursing and Midwifery (+1,343 WTE). There will be further growth this year, and Budget 2022 will set out the affordable recruitment numbers for 2022 in order to continue to adequately staff the health service.

As the questions raised by the Deputy relate to operational matters, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly with the details requested.

### **Vaccination Programme**

1196. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 2066 of 27 July 2021, if NIAC has reviewed further information or studies available regarding the use of mixed heterologous vaccine schedules; if NIAC made any updated recommendations on vaccination policy to the Government on this matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42078/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The immunisation programme in Ireland is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The Committee's recommendations are based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international best practices in relation to immunisation. It makes recommendations on vaccination policy to my Department.

NIAC has provided updated guidance in relation to the mixing of vaccines, specifically relating to certain people who are yet to complete a two dose Covid-19 vaccine regimen. The NIAC advice on heterologous vaccination relates to those who are contraindicated from taking a second vaccine dose of the vaccine they initially received (e.g. had a reaction to a first dose of vaccine) and those who have already had a first dose of Vaxzevria® and who did not complete the vaccination schedule as recommended and have requested a mRNA second dose.

The HSE has recently commenced heterologous vaccine administration in line with NIAC guidance.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1197. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health if he has plans to address the challenges facing Irish citizens resident in Canada who have received a mixed mRNA vaccine approved by Health Canada yet do not meet the specific definitions to be considered fully vaccinated for the purposes of travel to Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42079/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Government travel policy is consistently updated to meet the needs of travellers, while continuing to be informed by the international epidemiological situation and public health advice. The Department is giving consideration to amending the definition of a vaccinated person within travel regulations to include those who have received a heterologous vaccine regimen of EMA approved vaccines.

### **Health Services**

1198. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 148 of 22 April 2021, if a full-time residential place will be secured for the person. [42080/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have referred this question to the HSE and asked that they respond to the Deputy directly.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1199. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health when he last spoke with the heads of the maternity hospitals on the issue of partner access; the date of that meeting; and the outcome of same. [42081/21]

1208. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the dates he met with maternity hospitals on the lifting of restrictions for partners of women giving birth. [42090/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1199 and 1208 together.

Given the role of the HSE in the issuing of guidance regarding attendance at hospitals during the pandemic, which includes attendance at maternity hospitals, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1200. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if matters raised in correspondence (details supplied) will be examined. [42082/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1201. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if antigen testing for birthing partners has been considered in order to remove restrictions for women in labour to have partners in wards. [42083/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

1202. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if a person can obtain portable tables from the HSE for wheelchair users who are bed bound. [42084/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

1203. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the status of operations in a respite centre (details supplied). [42085/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

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### Health Services

1204. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health his plans to cease all activities at a home (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42086/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services

1205. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health when a child (details supplied) will be seen for a post-hearing test consultation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42087/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services Staff

1206. **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. [42088/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Medical Cards

1207. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the status of a medical card application by a person (details supplied). [42089/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1208 answered with Question No. 1199.*

### Health Services

1209. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the status of day care centres; and when a centre (details supplied) will reopen. [42091/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Questions - Written Answers*  
**Vaccination Programme**

1210. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if he will address the case of persons (details supplied). [42092/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

**Health Services Staff**

1211. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter regarding a lack of neurologists in hospitals in County Cork for those with MS such as a person (details supplied). [42093/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

**Cybersecurity Policy**

1212. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if any private cyber-security firms have been contracted to his Department or the HSE since 12 May 2021; if so, the details of the contract that has been entered into; and the cost of same to the Exchequer in tabular form. [42094/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In response to the cyber attack in May this year, my Department engaged the services of its existing security partner, procured following a competitive tender process in 2020. The services provided were in respect of identifying, investigating, containing and remediating the presence of any malicious activity. The cost for these services was approximately €510,000 excl VAT. In respect of the Health Service Executive, as this is a service matter I have asked them to respond to the Deputy directly as soon as possible.

**Disability Services**

1213. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of children seen across all areas of intervention in each CHO area since the commencement of the Progressing Disability Services Policy on 19 April 2021; and the number waiting for an assessment of need in each CHO since the advent of the Policy and the Children's Disability Network Team. [42095/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

**Home Care Packages**

1214. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if a homecare package will be

provided to a person (details supplied). [42096/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Hospital Services

1215. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to directives underway in each hospital children's ward in which parents who must stay overnight with their child for operations or observation are not allowed to swap out with the other parent who is already in a home bubble and in cases in which the child is already in a separate room within the hospital. [42097/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Cybersecurity Policy

1216. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the cost to date to his Department and the HSE to repair the damage caused by the recent cyber-attack in tabular form. [42098/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The cost of services provided to my Department in respect of identifying, investigating, containing and remediating the presence of any malicious activity was approximately €510,000 excl VAT.

In respect of the Health Service Executive, as this is a service matter I have asked them to respond to the Deputy directly as soon as possible.

### Data Protection

1217. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health if he will report on the number of Kerry residents, distinguishing between children and adults who have had genomic and DNA data gathered on them under the State's relationship with a research institute (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42103/21]

1218. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health if he will report on the extent of genomic and DNA data gathered on Kerry residents attending hospitals in the State including any historical data under a research institute (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42104/21]

1219. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health if he will report on the expected treatment of genomic and DNA data gathered under the State's relationship with a research institute (details supplied) in view of the sale to a company (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42105/21]

1352. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the sale of a company (details supplied); the implications of the sale on Irish DNA samples collected by the company; if he has engaged with the company in relation to their controllership

of genomic research databases following this sale; if GDPR allows for the private sale of Irish citizen's genomics data; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42511/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1217, 1218, 1219 and 1352 together.

I am aware of the sale of the company specified in the questions -Genuity (previously known as GMI). It is important to make clear that my Department has no relationship with the company concerned and has no involvement or role in the sale of a private company. Such matters are governed, in Ireland, by the sizable body of applicable company law.

Further, my Department has not provided funding to the company or asked any hospital to collect bio-samples or related personal data about individuals -adults or children- resident in Kerry or any county in the State for the purposes of the company.

Persons attend hospitals for care and treatment. If, for the purposes of that care and treatment, bio-samples (including blood samples which includes DNA) are required they must be obtained from the patient on the basis of the patient's informed consent and in line with long established principles of medical ethics. The processing of any personal information relating to those samples is regulated by data protection law and by the common law duty of confidentiality.

Further, if it is intended to further process -which includes disclosure to third parties- that personal data for research purposes, the Health Research Regulations set out a detailed governance structure including the safeguard of explicit consent to protect the data protection rights and freedoms of the individuals whose data are involved. It is important to note that the rights and protections under the Health Research Regulations cover not only personal data that readily identifies the individual but also covers the situation where that data has been pseudonymised by the hospital before disclosure.

Hospitals, as data controllers, are required under data protection law to be aware of and record all processing of personal data collected and held by them and the purposes for which it is used and the third parties to which they intend to disclose it. They must also comply with the numerous substantive obligations placed on them by GDPR and by the Health Research Regulations. That is designed to ensure that the disclosure by them of readily identifiable or pseudonymised personal health information relating to genomic or DNA samples to the company referenced in the question or to any third party must be on the basis of the explicit consent of the individuals concerned and also within a formal corporate governance framework.

In short, data controllers, whether hospitals or private companies, need to ensure that they comply fully with the applicable law in this area. That includes where a private company is sold whether within the State or to another company outside the State.

As the Deputies will be aware, the interpretation and enforcement of data protection law, including in relation to the processing of personal health data associated with genomic or DNA samples, is for the independent Data Protection Commission. It is not something that I, as Minister for Health, can interfere with or involve myself in. However, I can inform the Deputies that matters relating to the sale of bio-samples or personal data related to the samples are matters that fall to be addressed in the informed consent process.

As I said at the beginning of my answer, my Department has no relationship with the company specified in the Deputies' questions. If an agency of the State provided funding to the company then the terms of that funding and any relationship created would be between the agency and the company but under no circumstances could any relationship set aside the provisions of

data protection law. Indeed, it would be a serious breach of data protection law and of medical ethics for any hospital to gather genomic and DNA samples and related personal data as part of any relationship other than its relationship with the patient and his or her the care and treatment.

*Question No. 1218 answered with Question No. 1217.*

*Question No. 1219 answered with Question No. 1217.*

### **Health Services**

1220. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health if he will outline the incidence of presentations at hospitals in the State with myocarditis, aneurysms and clotting disorders per month in the first eight months of 2021; and if he will provide a comparison with a similar period in 2018 and 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42107/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Home Help Service**

1221. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Health when home help will be provided for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42109/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Healthcare Policy**

1222. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Health when his Department will publish the second National Action Plan on Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) 2021- 2025; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42111/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Ireland's second National Action Plan on Antimicrobial Resistance 2021-2025 is under development and the actions related to human health are being currently being finalised with stakeholders. The new plan will continue to be based on the five strategic objectives as outlined in the Global Action Plan on Antimicrobial Resistance, published by the World Health Organization in 2015.

As with the first Plan, it will be based on the One Health approach, which includes input across the human health, animal health and environment sectors to promote a synergistic response to the challenges presented by Antimicrobial Resistance. The timelines for the development of the second National Action Plan were impacted by the COVID-19 response during 2020. The experiences from the COVID-19 response provided an important context which has now been captured as a key input to the second plan to inform the human health actions. The new Plan will cover the period from this year through to 2025.

Antimicrobial Resistance remains a key priority and has been highlighted in National Risk Assessment reports since 2014. The COVID-19 response has provided a unique opportunity to further understand emerging infectious diseases. It has shown a particular role for infection pre-

vention and control, which remains an enabler for both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 care. Building on previous investment, significant funding has been provided in both 2020 and 2021 to further the provision of infection prevention and control and antimicrobial stewardship in an integrated way across acute and community health and social care services. This is also in line with the recommendations from the COVID-19 Nursing Homes Expert Panel Report.

Substantial progress has now been made on the development of the Ireland's second National Action Plan on Antimicrobial Resistance and my Department is working with One Health stakeholders to finalise and prepare the Plan for publication in the coming months.

*Question No. 1223 answered with Question No. 1180.*

### **Vaccination Programme**

1224. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding the safety of giving the HPV vaccine and the full adult Covid-19 vaccine to young children and teenagers given that it is a concern of many parents; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42121/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The immunisation programme in Ireland is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The Committee's recommendations are based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international best practices in relation to immunisation. It makes recommendations on vaccination policy to my Department.

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.

You can read the guidelines at: [www.hse.ie/eng/health/immunisation/hcpinfo/guidelines/covid19.pdf](http://www.hse.ie/eng/health/immunisation/hcpinfo/guidelines/covid19.pdf)

NIAC recommendations have been updated to enable co-administration of other vaccines with COVID-19 vaccines. Other vaccines may be administered with COVID-19 vaccines at the same time or at any interval. If other vaccines are being given at the same time as COVID-19 vaccines it is preferable to give them in different limbs.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1225. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Health if discussions are expected for the use of the drug Ivermectin for patients that have been partially or fully vaccinated presenting with Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42122/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Deputy is advised that, previously at the request of the NPHET, HIQA conducted a rapid evidence review to identify studies on the effectiveness of (i) pharmaceutical and (ii) non-pharmaceutical interventions, in the ambulatory setting, aimed at reducing progression to severe disease in individuals with confirmed or suspected COVID-19. This evidence review included a review of relevant studies in relation to Ivermectin.

As confirmed by HIQA's COVID-19 Expert Advisory Group, [https://www.hiqa.ie/sites/default/files/2021-02/Interventions-to-prevent-progression\\_Advice.pdf](https://www.hiqa.ie/sites/default/files/2021-02/Interventions-to-prevent-progression_Advice.pdf), evidence regarding the effectiveness of pharmaceutical treatments intended for systemic use, must be subject to the highest standards of rigour. Where a pharmaceutical intervention is recommended in the absence of appropriate supportive evidence, there is a significant potential for harm to the patient. Whereas this risk of harm may be justified in certain circumstances (e.g. the intervention poses minimal risk, or the setting involves patients with high potential to gain due to almost certain risk of severe adverse consequences in absence of any intervention) this is less likely to be the case in the setting of mild disease, where a great number of otherwise well patients would potentially receive the intervention.

HIQA has also advised my Department that several international health technology assessment or guideline development organisations have specifically reviewed the evidence to date on ivermectin in COVID-19 and have cautioned or advised against the use of ivermectin outside the setting of clinical trials on the basis of the current evidence. HIQA has also advised that the pharmaceutical company MSD (Merck, USA), which holds a license in the USA for the use of ivermectin as an antiparasitic agent, on 4 February 2021 published a statement including the following:

“It is important to note that, to-date, our analysis has identified:

— We do not believe that the data available support the safety and efficacy of ivermectin beyond the doses and populations indicated in the regulatory agency-approved prescribing information.”

Further research was undertaken by HIQA and updated advice was provided to the NPHE on 12 May: *COVID-19 - Interventions and health related factors that prevent infection or minimise progression to severe disease*. This document was subsequently published by HIQA on the 23 June 2021:

[https://www.hiqa.ie/sites/default/files/2021-06/Advice-to-NPHE\\_Interventions-to-prevent-COVID-19.pdf](https://www.hiqa.ie/sites/default/files/2021-06/Advice-to-NPHE_Interventions-to-prevent-COVID-19.pdf)

One of the key findings of the review was that Ivermectin is not currently licensed for the treatment of COVID-19. From this evidence summary, there is currently insufficient information on whether it can be safely used to prevent or reduce the severity of COVID-19. Ivermectin should therefore not be used as prophylaxis outside well-designed, regulated clinical trials as the benefits and harms are not yet clear when taken in the context of COVID-19 treatment.

Low certainty or very low certainty evidence was identified in relation to a small number of interventions. However, HIQA noted the low quality of the evidence available including the high risk of bias, small sample sizes and short durations of follow-up, different trials and advised that results from these studies should not be used to inform decision-making with respect to effectiveness.

HIQA's overall finding was that there is currently insufficient evidence of either effectiveness or safety to support the use of any pharmaceutical intervention outside of well conducted, well-regulated clinical trials. Furthermore, no evidence was identified for the effectiveness or safety of any non-pharmaceutical interventions.

I trust that the above information satisfactorily addresses your question.

1226. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the number of Covid-19 vaccines that have had to be disposed of due to the fact they were unused and went out of date. [42125/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

1227. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Health when a personal assistant service will be provided to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42128/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1228 answered with Question No. 1193.*

### **Hospital Services**

1229. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide a detailed response as to the reason Beaumont Hospital is denying medical care to Covid-19 unvaccinated patients who are on the transplant waiting list; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42132/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

1230. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the most appropriate method of transport for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42148/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Departmental Staff**

1231. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the 2019 and 2020 budget and staffing composition of the Office of the Chief Medical Officer. [42151/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Department does not allocate its administrative budget by Division.

As of the 31st December 2019 the Office of the Chief Medical Officer had 47 staff or 41.6 WTE and as of 31st December 2020, there were a total of 32 staff or 30.1 WTE. This reflects a reorganisation of functions during 2020, including the reassignment of some functions to other

## Divisions of the Department.

Since May 2020 the Department has undergone a significant reorganisation in order to manage the State's response to COVID – 19. The organisational structure and staff changes in the Department during this time is in the context of our workforce plan and additional needs relating to the pandemic. The staffing numbers in the Office of the Chief Medical Officer's Division is also reflective of the changing nature, reorganisation of functions and prioritisation of work in the various Divisions across the Department.

### Departmental Staff

1232. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the 2019 and 2020 budget and staffing composition of the Office of the Chief Nursing Office. [42152/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Department does not allocate its administrative budget by Division.

As of the 31st December 2019 the Division of the Office of the Chief Nursing Officer (which encompasses a number of policy Units) had 20 staff or 19.6 WTE and as of 31st December 2020, there were a total of 31 staff or 30.8 WTE. The change in staffing reflects a reorganisation of functions among Divisions of the Department during 2020.

Since May 2020 the Department has undergone a significant reorganisation in order to manage the State's response to COVID – 19. The organisational structure, and staff changes, in the Department during this time is in the context of our workforce plan and additional needs relating to the pandemic. The staffing numbers in the Chief Nursing Officer's Division is also reflective of the changing nature, reorganisation of functions and prioritisation of work in the various Divisions across the Department.

### State Bodies

1233. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the 2019 and 2020 budget and staffing composition of HIQA. [42153/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Health Information and Quality Authority has advised my Department that HIQA's annual budget was €24,352,895 in 2019 and €26,061,575 in 2020.

The total average headcount for staff employed by HIQA was 248 in 2019 and 261 in 2020. The staffing composition of HIQA is broken down by directorate for 2019 and 2020 in the following table:

Directorate	2019	2020
Regulation	163	170
Health Technology Assessment	14	14
Health Information and Standards	23	26
Support Staff	48	51
TOTAL	248	261

*Question No. 1234 answered with Question No. 1180.*

### Health Services Staff

1235. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Health the number of psychologists currently working within HSE services in south County Tipperary; the efforts south Tipperary HSE services are making to find a qualified psychologist to cover upcoming maternity leave in the area; the HSE's position on the recruitment of psychologists to cover maternity leave; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42161/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Waiting Lists**

1236. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on outpatient waiting lists in Beaumont Hospital; the length of their wait broken down into 3 months segments in tabular form. [42163/21]

1237. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on inpatient waiting lists in Beaumont Hospital; the length of their wait broken down into 3 months segments in tabular form. [42164/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1236 and 1237 together.

It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted in the last eighteen months as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic and more recently as a result of the ransomware attack. While significant progress was made in reducing waiting times from June 2020 onwards, the surge in Covid-19 cases in the first quarter of 2021 and the associated curtailment of acute hospital services, coupled with the ransomware attack of May 2021, has impacted waiting times. However, the HSE advise that acute services are now almost all fully restored to pre cyber-attack levels, and are operating in line with relevant Covid protocols.

My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) are focusing on improving access to elective care in order to reduce waiting times for patients. These plans include increased use of private hospitals, funding weekend and evening work in public hospitals, funding "see and treat" services where minor procedures are provided at the same time as outpatient consultations, providing virtual clinics and increasing capacity in the public hospital system.

An additional €240 million has been provided in Budget 2021 for an access to care fund, €210m of which has been allocated to the HSE and a further €30m to the NTPF. This is to be used to fund additional capacity to address the shortfall arising as a result of infection control measures taken in the context of COVID-19, as well as addressing backlogs in waiting lists.

My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are currently working on a Multiannual Waiting List Plan to address waiting lists and bring them in line with Sláintecare targets over the coming years.

The data requested by the Deputy concerning IPDC & outpatient waiting lists at Beaumont Hospital is outlined in the attached document. This information is also available on the NTPF website at: [www.ntpf.ie/home/nwld.htm](http://www.ntpf.ie/home/nwld.htm)

<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumenta-

*Question No. 1237 answered with Question No. 1236.*

### **Disability Services**

1238. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Health the number of children awaiting an occupational therapist assessment in CHO9. [42165/21]

1239. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Health the number of children awaiting a speech and language therapist assessment in CHO9. [42166/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1238 and 1239 together.

As these are service matters, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1239 answered with Question No. 1238.*

### **Health Service Executive**

1240. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of an application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42174/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Primary Care Centres**

1241. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the reason 50 patients (details supplied) cannot be seen by the community podiatry team in Rathass primary care centre, County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42175/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

1242. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health his advice on a matter (details supplied) in relation to podiatry support; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42181/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

1243. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Health the up-to-date position on an

eye clinic (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42195/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Staff**

1244. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE will re-examine bringing in staff on a contract basis with regard to the major issue in relation to the lack of speech and language therapists in the midland region especially to assist children who need this facility in view of the fact that due to operational reasons the HSE cannot provide this facility through its own staff; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42197/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1245 answered with Question No. 1043.*

### **Health Service Executive**

1246. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will be facilitated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42199/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible

*Question No. 1247 answered with Question No. 1193.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1248. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Health if one to one music classes are identified as a personal service; and if he will provide clarity on the return of one to one music classes under the current public health guidelines. [42202/21]

1275. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health if he will establish a framework that brings the public health restrictions on individual in-person music tuition in line with other sectors in order that students can attend classes as soon as possible; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42308/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1248 and 1275 together.

Under the current guidelines, one-to-one music tuition is allowed with all relevant protective measures in place.

As outlined in COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting, which was announced by Government on 31 August, from 20 September organised indoor group activities (sports, arts, culture, dance classes) can take place with capacity limits of 100 people (with appropriate protective measures) where all patrons are immune (fully vaccinated or recovered from COVID-19 within previous 6 months). Where patrons have mixed

immunity status, pods of up to 6 participants will be permitted with multiple pods permitted.

Based on the criteria of at or close to 90% of people 16 or over being fully vaccinated in the coming weeks and having regard to the incidence and behaviour of the disease at that time, from 22 October onwards, restrictions will be lifted including restrictions on indoor leisure/community activities.

The Arts Council has guidance titled COVID-19 Reopening Guidelines for Young People, Children and Education which may be of use. This guidance is currently being updated to include the new guidelines and can be found at [www.artscouncil.ie/covid-19/government-guidelines/](http://www.artscouncil.ie/covid-19/government-guidelines/).

Since the onset of the pandemic, we have saved lives and limited the impact of the disease on society in Ireland due to the huge effort of people across the country. Thanks to the hard work of the Irish people and the progress of our vaccination programme, we are now entering a new phase in the management of the pandemic. As our approach to the management of COVID-19 transitions from population wide restrictions to guidance we must continue to practice basic preventative behaviours, including in relation to self-isolation and restricting movements when advised, observing good respiratory and hand hygiene, physical distancing and mask wearing when appropriate.

COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting can be found online: [www.gov.ie/en/press-release/f5291-post-cabinet-statement-covid-19-reframing-the-challenge-continuing-our-recovery-and-reconnecting/](http://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/f5291-post-cabinet-statement-covid-19-reframing-the-challenge-continuing-our-recovery-and-reconnecting/)

*Question No. 1249 answered with Question No. 1115.*

### **Health Services Staff**

1250. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Health the number of permanent or temporary posts that are available in a region for health care support assistant posts by county; the reason there are little or no posts in some counties compared with other counties in the region (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42214/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Vaccination Programme**

1251. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health his views on a matter regarding the vaccination programme (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42216/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Home Care Packages**

1252. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Health his plans to deal with the recruitment crisis in the homecare sector; if he is satisfied that his Department's policy on this

sector will deliver on policy to allow all persons who wish to remain living in their own homes to do so; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42218/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** The Programme for Government (2020) commits to the introduction of “a statutory scheme to support people to live in their own homes, which will provide equitable access to high-quality, regulated home care.” In this regard, the Department is in the process of developing a statutory scheme for the financing and regulation of home-support. It is intended that the new scheme will provide equitable and transparent access to high-quality services based on a person’s assessed care needs.

As part of this work, the Department is examining the potential demand and cost of introducing such a scheme. Following this, work will be undertaken to examine the associated workforce requirements for the introduction of such a scheme and my Department will engage with other sectors as required in this regard.

### **Health Services Staff**

1253. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the amount paid to companies (details supplied) in each month since March 2020 to August 2021. [42226/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Dental Services**

1254. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health the waiting lists for primary school children in each county; the number of children still awaiting their routine second and sixth class dental check-ups for each of 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42229/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1255 answered with Question No. 1038.*

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

1256. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of a hospital appointment for a person (details supplied); when they will be called to have the procedure carried out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42243/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## Departmental Schemes

1257. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his plans to add emphysema and asthma to the long-term illness scheme or otherwise reimburse costs; the reason these conditions are not included on the long-term illness scheme; if he will reconsider same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42244/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Long Term Illness (LTI) Scheme was established under Section 59(3) of the Health Act 1970 (as amended). The conditions covered by the scheme are: acute leukaemia; mental handicap; cerebral palsy; mental illness (in a person under 16); cystic fibrosis; multiple sclerosis; diabetes insipidus; muscular dystrophies; diabetes mellitus; Parkinsonism; epilepsy; phenylketonuria; haemophilia; spina bifida; hydrocephalus; and conditions arising from the use of Thalidomide.

Under the Scheme, patients receive drugs, medicines, and medical and surgical appliances directly related to the treatment of their illness, free of charge. There are no plans to extend the list of conditions covered by the Scheme at this time. However, a review of the current eligibility framework, including the basis for existing hospital and medication charges, will be carried out under commitments given in the Sláintecare Implementation Strategy. In the meantime, for people who are not eligible for the LTI scheme, there are other arrangements which protect them from excessive medicine costs.

Under the Drugs Payment Scheme, no individual or family pays more than €114 a month towards the cost of approved prescribed medicines. The scheme significantly reduces the cost burden for families and individuals with ongoing expenditure on medicines.

People who cannot, without undue hardship, arrange for the provision of medical services for themselves and their dependants may be eligible for a medical card. In accordance with the provisions of the Health Act 1970 (as amended), eligibility for a medical card is determined by the HSE. In certain circumstances the HSE may exercise discretion and grant a medical card, even though an applicant exceeds the income guidelines, where he or she faces difficult financial circumstances, such as extra costs arising from illness. In addition, where an applicant is over the income limit for a medical card, they are also assessed for a GP visit card, which entitles the applicant to GP visits without charge.

Finally, citizens may also be entitled to claim tax relief on the cost of their medical expenses, including medicines prescribed by a doctor, dentist, or consultant. Relief is at the standard tax rate of 20%.

## Hospital Waiting Lists

1258. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on waiting lists as inpatients and outpatients, respectively in all departments in University Hospital Waterford; the breakdown for the cardiology department including treatment and diagnoses; the number of persons on the waiting list for emergency cardiac care in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42250/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted in the last eighteen months as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic and more recently as a result of the ransomware attack. While significant progress was made in reducing waiting times from June 2020 onwards, the surge in Covid-19 cases in the first quarter of 2021 and the associated curtailment of acute hos-

pital services, coupled with the ransomware attack of May 2021, has impacted waiting times. However, the HSE advise that acute services are now almost all fully restored to pre cyberattack levels, and are operating in line with relevant Covid protocols.

My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) are focusing on improving access to elective care in order to reduce waiting times for patients. These plans include increased use of private hospitals, funding weekend and evening work in public hospitals, funding “see and treat” services where minor procedures are provided at the same time as outpatient consultations, providing virtual clinics and increasing capacity in the public hospital system.

An additional €240 million has been provided in Budget 2021 for an access to care fund, €210m of which has been allocated to the HSE and a further €30m to the NTPF. This is to be used to fund additional capacity to address the shortfall arising as a result of infection control measures taken in the context of COVID-19, as well as addressing backlogs in waiting lists.

My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are currently working on a Multiannual Waiting List Plan to address waiting lists and bring them in line with Sláintecare targets over the coming years.

The information requested by the Deputy concerning the number of persons on waiting lists as inpatients and outpatients, respectively in all departments in University Hospital Waterford is provided in two of the attached documents. Regarding the information requested in respect of cardiac care, the third attached document provides a breakdown of routine and urgent elective cases and procedures.

NTPF waiting lists are collected in respect of outpatient specialties and inpatient/daycase procedures. Waiting times can be examined in terms of the appointment or procedure that a patient is waiting for, however it is not possible to do so on the basis of clinical diagnosis.

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\\_pq125809092021\\_en.xlsx](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09_pq125809092021_en.xlsx) Cardiology University Hospital Waterford

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\\_pq125809092021\\_en.pdf](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09_pq125809092021_en.pdf) IPDC University Hospital Waterford

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\\_pq125809092021\\_en.pdf](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09_pq125809092021_en.pdf) OPD University Hospital Waterford

### National Maternity Hospital

1259. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if the National Maternity Hospital project board is required to comply with the updated Public Spending Code lifecycle by submitting three separate business cases, preliminary, intermediate and final; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42252/21]

1260. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the position the business case submitted to his Department by the National Maternity Hospital project board in December 2020 currently lies in relation to the Public Spending Code life cycle decision making process; if the National Maternity Hospital business case submitted in December 2020 represents a preliminary business case seeking approval in principle, a detailed business case for pre-tender approval or a final business case for approval to proceed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42253/21]

1261. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if the National Maternity Hospital business case has been progressed since December 2020; if so, the way in which it has been progressed in relation to the Public Spending Code; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42254/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1259, 1260 and 1261 together.

A business case for the national maternity hospital (NMH) relocation project was submitted to the Department of Health by the NMH Project Board in December 2020. This provided a comprehensive overview of the proposed project. However, as a project initiated prior to the updated Public Spending Code (PSC), the Project Board is undertaking additional work to ensure full compliance with the new PSC. It will be submitted to the Department, as Approving Authority, and to Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (D/PER) for technical review in due course.

The PSC is designed to ensure that investment decisions are underpinned by a clear policy rationale and that costs are well understood. In 2019, the PSC was updated and introduced a new project lifecycle, tightening the arrangements for project decision-making, and clarifying the roles of the parties involved, including the responsibilities for Sponsoring Agencies and Approving Authorities.

All capital development proposals must progress through a number of approval stages, in line with the new lifecycle approach of the updated PSC, including detailed appraisal, planning, design and procurement before a firm timeline or funding requirement can be established.

The specific requirements that must be included in a business case at the various stages of the PSC, and the stages at which these are to be published, are detailed at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/public-spending-code/>

Whilst the NMH project pre-dates the updated PSC requirements, the PSC requires that so-called “legacy projects” undergo the same level of scrutiny as new proposals.

The business case for the relocation of the NMH to Elm Park is well advanced, but is being updated to ensure that it fully complies with all elements required under the updated PSC and by the National Investment Office in D/PER.

Once the business case has been updated, it will be subject to review in line with the requirements under Decision Gates 1 and 2 of the PSC. This approach is consistent with legacy projects across other areas of Government.

The Project Board has been working on updating these requirements and an updated business case is expected by the Department in the coming weeks.

If the technical review considers the business case to be in compliance with the PSC, the project proposal will be submitted to Government for approval-in-principle to progress to the next stage of the PSC. If approved-in-principle is granted to the business case, the project can move to the preparation of tender documents in line with EU Law and deployment of a tendering strategy.

*Question No. 1260 answered with Question No. 1259.*

*Question No. 1261 answered with Question No. 1259.*

## **Hospital Services**

1262. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Health when the Health Service Executive will increase diabetic services at University Hospital Limerick (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42257/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1263. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health his plans to introduce a compensation scheme for families of health workers who have died from coronavirus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42261/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Work is ongoing in my Department on the development of a scheme to benefit the families of frontline healthcare workers who died from COVID-19, where it is likely that they contracted the virus in work.

I intend to bring a proposal to Government in respect of the scheme shortly. Details of the scheme will be made available once it has been approved by Government.

However, I can confirm that the proposed scheme is being developed to apply retrospectively to deaths of all frontline healthcare workers delivering services during the pandemic where they are likely to have contracted Covid-19 during the course of their work.

## **Information and Communications Technology**

1264. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the timeline he is working towards for the implementation of The National Medical Laboratory Information System project which was promised to begin roll-out in 2018; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42266/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this programme is being managed within the HSE, I have asked the relevant areas within the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## **Medicinal Products**

1265. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the status of the reimbursement application of a drug (details supplied); the expected timeframe for the completion of negotiations regarding the pricing and reimbursement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42279/21]

1281. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42331/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1265 and 1281 together.

The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medi-

cines 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) for the treatment of patients with 5q spinal muscular atrophy (SMA) with a bi-allelic mutation in the SMN1 gene and a clinical diagnosis of SMA type 1, or patients with 5q SMA with a bi-allelic mutation in the SMN1 gene and up to 3 copies of the SMN2 gene.

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.

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. The NCPE recommended that Zolgensma not be considered for reimbursement unless cost-effectiveness could be improved relative to existing treatments.

Pricing/reimbursement negotiations are currently underway, having commenced in July 2021.

A final decision on the pricing/reimbursement application for Zolgensma will be made in accordance with the 2013 Health Act.

*Question No. 1266 answered with Question No. 956.*

*Question No. 1267 answered with Question No. 953.*

*Question No. 1268 answered with Question No. 988.*

*Question No. 1269 answered with Question No. 956.*

## **Vaccination Programme**

1270. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health his views on a matter regarding payment to pharmacies for the administration of vaccines (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42292/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible

### **Departmental Funding**

1271. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health if funding will be made available to continue a service (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42296/21]

1273. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health if urgent funding will be made available to an organisation (details supplied) to continue a service in County Clare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42301/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1271 and 1273 together.

The Department of Health and the HSE provide specialist disability services, including Day Services and Rehabilitative Training, to people with disabilities who require such services. The HSE has no statutory obligation to provide transport services and no funding is allocated for this. Transport is not considered a core health service and as such Day Service funding does not include transport.

Some transport supports are provided by the HSE or funded agencies on a discretionary basis, and a variety of transport solutions are pursued in different CHO areas. These include travel training by to enable public transport to be used upon commencement of a day programme (where applicable), local transport such as Local Link, private bus transport providers and taxis, funded via a combination of service provider, HSE funding, service user contribution, and / or combined funding; and some service providers provide transport where capacity exists.

In general, day service users are in receipt of disability allowance and are automatically entitled to the Free Travel Pass.

There are improvements in access to a range of transport supports available to persons with disabilities in the State, for example the Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers scheme, operated by the Revenue Commissioners; the Free Travel Scheme operated by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection; and CLÁR funding, approved by the Minister for Rural and Community Development, to voluntary organisations providing transport for people with significant mobility issues.

Under the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017 - 2021, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport has responsibility for the continued development of accessibility and availability of accessible public transport.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

1272. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 264 of 25 February 2021, if a further response will issue to queries (details supplied). [42300/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1273 answered with Question No. 1271.*

### **Health Promotion**

1274. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the steps he is taking to address excessive consumption of unhealthy foods in preschool settings particularly in relation to celebrations (details supplied); if guidance has been issued to preschools on the consumption of unhealthy foods; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42306/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** My Department is finalising Nutrition Standards for Early Learning and Care Services developed in consultation with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. The Standards will be available in early October.

While these Nutrition Standards recognise that there are instances where the food provided varies due to the location or the nature of the occasion such as field trips and birthday celebrations, they recommend that food provided on these days still needs to comply with the Standards and suggest non-food treats to mark these occasions.

In a large service a birthday may be celebrated every couple of days. If children fill up on cakes and treat foods they will have little room left for the nutritious food that they need. It is important to celebrate and mark birthdays and the Standards provide advice on dealing with them. They recommend marking the occasion with fun games and activities rather than foods, and if a parent insists that a cake is sent to the Service they suggest parents are asked to keep it small, keep servings for children to bite size amounts and send leftovers home with the parent. If a number of birthdays fall on the one week, the Standards suggest consider marking them together at one celebration.

*Question No. 1275 answered with Question No. 1248.*

### **Vaccination Programme**

1276. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Health if discussions are expected to take place to seek clarity for those persons who have had a severe reaction to the first-dose of the Covid-19 vaccine and are advised by hospital consultants and doctors not to get a second dose of the vaccine and are therefore unable to get the EU Digital COVID Certificate (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42311/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Digital COVID certificate is not a precondition for travel but can make travelling within the EU easier.

The Digital COVID Certificate is designed to support safe travel within the EU and other countries may be using the EU Digital COVID Certificate for domestic purposes, for example access to restaurants or cinemas.

It is advisable to check the rules in the destination country before travelling.

## Departmental Funding

1277. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health his plans to provide funding for appropriate respite services for persons affected by Prader Willi Syndrome in view of the ultimate cost savings of such a services due to it allowing families and communities retain persons affected by this syndrome in families and in the community longer thus reducing the requirement for full-time residential care and also reducing incidences of crises for families and so on; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42316/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## Health Services Staff

1278. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the steps he plans to take to address the crisis in recruitment in the homecare sector in view of the savings and other advantages to homecare as opposed to institutional care in many cases and also the health benefits as evidenced during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42318/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** The Programme for Government (2020) commits to the introduction of “a statutory scheme to support people to live in their own homes, which will provide equitable access to high-quality, regulated home care.” In this regard, the Department is in the process of developing a statutory scheme for the financing and regulation of home-support. It is intended that the new scheme will provide equitable and transparent access to high-quality services based on a person’s assessed care-needs.

As part of this work, the Department is examining the potential demand and cost of introducing such a scheme. Following this, work will be undertaken to examine the associated workforce requirements for the introduction of such a scheme and my Department will engage with other sectors as required in this regard.

## Covid-19 Pandemic

1279. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Health when indoor classes (details supplied) are allowed to recommence. [42321/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As outlined in *COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting*, which was published by Government on 31 August, organised indoor group activities can take place from 20 September with capacity limits of 100 people (with appropriate protective measures) where all patrons are immune (fully vaccinated or recovered from COVID-19 within previous 6 months), or accompanied minors (under 18). Where patrons have mixed immunity status, pods of up to 6 participants will be permitted with multiple pods permitted subject to protective measures.

Since the onset of the pandemic, we have saved lives and limited the impact of the disease on society in Ireland due to the huge effort of people across the country. Thanks to the hard work of the Irish people and the progress of our vaccination programme, we are now entering a new phase in the management of the pandemic. As our approach to the management of COVID-19 transitions from population wide restrictions to guidance we must continue to practice

basic preventative behaviours, including in relation to self-isolation and restricting movements when advised, observing good respiratory and hand hygiene, physical distancing and mask wearing when appropriate.

*COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting* can be found online: [www.gov.ie/en/press-release/f5291-post-cabinet-statement-covid-19-reframing-the-challenge-continuing-our-recovery-and-reconnecting/](http://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/f5291-post-cabinet-statement-covid-19-reframing-the-challenge-continuing-our-recovery-and-reconnecting/)

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

1280. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of a hospital appointment for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42322/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1281 answered with Question No. 1265.*

### **Health Services**

1282. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health his views on a series of matters raised by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42351/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Ireland's COVID-19 vaccination programme strategy is to distribute all available vaccines 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 my Department.

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.

You can read the guidelines at: [www.hse.ie/eng/health/immunisation/hcpinfo/guidelines/covid19.pdf](http://www.hse.ie/eng/health/immunisation/hcpinfo/guidelines/covid19.pdf)

On the 28th of May, the EMA recommended an extension of the use of the Pfizer vaccine to include those aged 12 to 15 years. The EMA subsequently advised an extension of indication for the Moderna vaccine to include use in children aged 12-17 years. The NIAC reviewed these findings and has recommended that vaccination be extended to those aged 12 -15 years, those in this age group will be offered an mRNA vaccination to protect themselves from COVID-19. There are currently no vaccines authorised for use for those aged under 12 years old.

Clinical trials to assess the safety and effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines in children under 12 years of age are currently ongoing, with results expected later this year. Vaccine manufacturers Pfizer and Moderna are conducting trials in healthy children between the ages of 6 months and 11 years old using lower vaccine doses. Children have different reactions to medications and vaccinations, so conducting clinical trials specific to that population is important to fully understand the benefits and potential side effects of COVID-19 vaccines in this group. Once the data becomes available, it will be thoroughly reviewed by the European Medicines Agency and the National Immunisation Advisory Committee prior to the vaccines being administered to children under age 12. Non-pharmaceutical interventions including social distancing, hand hygiene, good respiratory etiquette and ventilation, as well as vaccinating as many adults and adolescents as possible will all help lower case rates amongst younger children.

### **Hospital Waiting Lists**

1283. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health the reason a person (details supplied) is waiting so long for surgery; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42354/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Home Help Service**

1284. **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. [42361/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Services**

1285. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if an extension to a current hospital stay may be granted to facilitate additional medical assessment as to such a time that family members who are currently in mandatory isolation may contribute to an in-person assessment in the case of a person (details supplied); if a more realistic offer of home help hours may be provided as to the current offer due to the exception health needs of family members in

the residence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42362/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Vaccination Programme

1286. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the reason for the decision to withdraw the Defence Forces in their vital support role in the vaccination centres in Galway considering that their role has been of vital importance to the effective and efficient vaccine roll-out programme to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42365/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Vaccination Programme

1287. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health if persons who have received mixed Covid-19 vaccinations (details supplied) are accepted in order for EU Digital COVID Certificates to issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42368/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** EU Digital COVID Certificates are being issued to individuals who have received a heterologous vaccine regimen in Ireland.

As such persons who have received a ‘mixed-dose’ vaccination regimen in Ireland can also request or acquire a Digital COVID Certificate after they have received their second vaccination from the HSE.

It is important to note that for the purposes of travel into Ireland, a person with mixed vaccination doses is not considered a fully vaccinated person. International travel policy is under continuous review, including in relation to this matter.

An Irish issued DCC can be used for travel purposes within the EU and for indoor hospitality where necessary in Ireland

### Ambulance Service

1288. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health the average cost to the health service of an emergency ambulance response to a 999 call; and the average cost to the health service of an emergency ambulance to a 999 call with regard to each advanced medical priority dispatch system category in 2019 and 2020. [42369/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Emergency Departments

1289. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health the fully absorbed cost of the

average emergency department attendance; and the average daily running cost of a hospital bed in an accident and emergency department at a model 4 hospital for example Cork University Hospital in 2019 and 2020. [42370/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Charges**

1290. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if the case of a person will be reviewed (details supplied); and if the HSE can offer assistance in this case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42377/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Waiting Lists**

1291. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if an appointment will be expedited for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42381/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1292 answered with Question No. 1043.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1293. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health if he will outline the Departments involved in the development of the EU Digital Covid Certificate portal; the status of the development process detailing any unexpected delays; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42392/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Implementation of the EU Digital Covid Certificate cuts across several Government departments and agencies, many of whom are involved in related COVID-19 projects, policy and legislative developments which connect with the implementation of the Certificate, for example, the HSE who provide the underlying data, OGCIO who generate and distribute certificates based on this data and the Department of Health who has overseen the establishment and operation of the call-center.

To date over 3.6 million vaccination certificates have been issued by email and post. As additional people become eligible for vaccination certificates, certificates are automatically issued after the second vaccination. The Office of Government Chief Information Office (OGCIO) issues certificates based on underlying data provided by the HSE and private test providers. Of course there are a small percentage of the overall number who have yet to receive their vaccination certificates (less than 0.9 % of all those vaccinated to-date) related to data quality issues. The HSE has multiple data sources for vaccine data (e.g., vaccine portal, GPs, pharmacies, acute settings) and data quality is varied. Extensive data quality work has been undertaken by

the HSE to ensure sufficient and fully accurate information is available to support both generation and issuing of the certificate to an individual. The HSE continues to work to resolve outstanding data quality issues in relation to vaccination in the coming weeks.

As decided by Government, the Department of Health has mobilised a DCC contact centre at exceptional pace to manage the required workflows and communications to support citizens who may have queries in relation to Digital COVID Certificates for the purposes of travel. This has required an incredible effort across multiple government agencies to put in place the people, processes and technology required. An interim emergency line was put in place from 13th July in advance of the initial contact service going live on the 19th July given the level of public interest as soon as the first certificates began to issue through OGCIO.

Due to unprecedented demand on the call centre over and above estimates of call centre demand based on an assessment of travel bookings and survey or insights data on travel intentions that Government or industry had access to, several enhancements were accelerated and put in place. The centre ramped up the number of call-handling agents over its initial weeks and stands at 86 agents since the 23rd August. Increased call handling technical capacity was also put in place through a second freephone number on 20th July.

The call centre also introduced new additional service channels through the launch of online portals to provide additional channels to service queries from members of the public. A new online form to request Recovery certificates for eligible persons was released on 22 July. Following this a portal allowing for Vaccine Certificate Request, Vaccine Certificate Details Update and a Vaccine Status portal were launched on the 30th July.

The Call Centre continues to work to improve the service and it is expected that a portal to allow citizens with incomplete citizen or vaccine information to provide this data will be launched very shortly to support the HSE gather outstanding data from members of the public who have yet to receive their certificates due to data quality issues. Once a person's identity and eligibility have been verified through this portal, a certificate can issue. Development work is also underway introduce webchat and a last portal to cater for certificate applicants for a DCC who are not resident within Ireland but may be resident on the island of Ireland and third countries.

### **Departmental Data**

1294. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of children under the age of 18 years awaiting a first-time appointment since being switched to the new children's disability network team for east central Cork by age, intervention type, SLT, occupational therapy and physiotherapy in tabular form. [42396/21]

1295. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of children under the age of 18 years awaiting a first-time appointment since being switched to the new children's disability network team for central Cork by age, intervention type, SLT, occupational therapy and physiotherapy in tabular form. [42397/21]

1296. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of children under the age of 18 years awaiting a first-time appointment since being switched to the new children's disability network team for north-east Cork by age, intervention type SLT, occupational therapy and physiotherapy in tabular form. [42398/21]

1297. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of children under the age of 18 years awaiting a first-time appointment since being switched to the new children's

disability network team for south Cork city by age, intervention type, SLT, occupational therapy and physiotherapy in tabular form. [42399/21]

1298. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of children under the age of 18 years awaiting a first-time appointment since being switched to the new children's disability network team in west Cork city by age, intervention type, SLT, occupational therapy and physiotherapy in tabular form. [42400/21]

1299. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of children under the age of 18 years awaiting a first-time appointment since being switched to the new children's disability network team for north-west Cork city by age, intervention type, SLT, occupational therapy and physiotherapy in tabular form. [42401/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1294, 1295, 1296, 1297, 1298 and 1299 together.

As these are service matters, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1295 answered with Question No. 1294.*

*Question No. 1296 answered with Question No. 1294.*

*Question No. 1297 answered with Question No. 1294.*

*Question No. 1298 answered with Question No. 1294.*

*Question No. 1299 answered with Question No. 1294.*

### **Departmental Data**

1300. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of children under the age of 18 years awaiting a first-time appointment since being switched to the new children's disability network team for central Cork city by age, intervention type, SLT, occupational therapy and physiotherapy in tabular form. [42402/21]

1301. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of children under the age of 18 years awaiting a first-time appointment since being switched to the new children's disability network team in north Cork city and Blarney by age, intervention type, SLT, occupational therapy and physiotherapy in tabular form. [42403/21]

1302. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of children under the age of 18 years awaiting a first-time appointment since being switched to the new children's disability network team for west central Cork city by age, intervention type, SLT, occupational therapy and physiotherapy in tabular form. [42404/21]

1303. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of children under the age of 18 years awaiting a first-time appointment since being switched to the new children's disability network team for south-east Cork city by age, intervention type, SLT, occupational therapy and physiotherapy in tabular form. [42405/21]

1304. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of children under the age of 18 years awaiting a first-time appointment since being switched to the new children's disability network team for Carrigaline, Kinsale, Bandon, Cork by age, intervention type, SLT,

occupational therapy and physiotherapy in tabular form. [42406/21]

1305. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of children under the age of 18 years awaiting a first-time appointment since being switched to the new children's disability network team for east Cork city by age, intervention type, SLT, occupational therapy and physiotherapy in tabular form. [42407/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1300, 1301, 1302, 1303, 1304 and 1305 together.

As these are service matters, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1301 answered with Question No. 1300.*

*Question No. 1302 answered with Question No. 1300.*

*Question No. 1303 answered with Question No. 1300.*

*Question No. 1304 answered with Question No. 1300.*

*Question No. 1305 answered with Question No. 1300.*

*Question No. 1306 answered with Question No. 1036.*

*Question No. 1307 answered with Question No. 1180.*

#### **Departmental Data**

1308. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health the number of dentists with medical card contracts in counties Louth and Meath in each of the years 2016 to 2021, respectively, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42412/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

#### **Departmental Data**

1309. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients currently waiting for a dental consultation and dental surgery in counties Louth and Meath in tabular form; the percentage of patients who have been on each respective waiting list for over 12 months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42413/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1310 answered with Question No. 955.*

#### **Departmental Data**

1311. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost to deliver an additional 200 intensive support packages. [42421/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Information and Communications Technology**

1312. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the timeframe for the delivery and full operationalisation of the single integrated financial and procurement management system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42422/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the HSE have direct responsibility for delivery of this important programme of work we are referring this PQ to the relevant areas within the HSE for direct response to the Deputy.

*Question No. 1313 answered with Question No. 1180.*

### **Departmental Funding**

1314. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide funding for a five-year hypertension awareness and behaviour change campaign led by an organisation (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42451/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** A request for funding from the organisation referred to by the Deputy has been received. My officials are engaged in ongoing dialogue with the organisation and a recommendation on funding is expected to be made in the near future.

### **Departmental Strategies**

1315. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if he will ensure full funding for the recommendations of the new stroke strategy and ensure its publication alongside a comprehensive implementation plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42452/21]

1316. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide priority funding for research to establish the number of stroke survivors living in Ireland along with a full assessment of their service and support needs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42453/21]

1500. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated full additional cost of implementing the new stroke programme strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43142/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1315, 1316 and 1500 together.

These Parliamentary Questions relate to the Health Service Executive's proposed new Stroke Strategy. This proposal will be considered as part of the overall Budget and Estimate processes. Until these processes have been concluded I am not in a position to comment on these matters.

The Government is committed to implementing National Health Strategies including the National Clinical Programme for Stroke as set out in the Programme for Government - Our

Shared Future 2020.

*Question No. 1316 answered with Question No. 1315.*

### Primary Care Services

1317. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if he will take steps to ensure access to diagnostic testing brain natriuretic peptide blood testing and echocardiography at primary care level; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42454/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Some €25m was allocated to the GP Access to Diagnostics Initiative in 2021. This initiative allows GPs to refer patients directly to private providers in order to access diagnostic radiology services of various modalities, in a community-based setting. The potential to further enhance this initiative to provide additional access for GPs to further diagnostics including NTproBNP blood testing and Echocardiogram has been identified, with work ongoing. As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services

1318. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health his views on the roll-out of heart failure community integration teams countrywide and on ensuring that their roles are standardised across all CHO areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42455/21]

1320. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health the steps being taken to improve investment in the heart failure workforce; his views on the delivery of four heart failure clinical nurse specialists per 150,000 population starting with filling currently funded whole-time equivalents; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42457/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1318 and 1320 together.

Budget 2019 provided €20 million for the establishment of a new ring-fenced Sláintecare Integration Fund to test and scale how services can best be delivered. The Integration Fund looked for initiatives that support the delivery of integrated care and the shift to community care in new and innovative ways, helping to reduce and prevent hospital visits. This will support us in meeting our ultimate goal of reducing waiting lists and reducing waiting times.

The Fund supported a number of projects testing integrated care pathways for heart failure patients. Details of these projects are set out below.

Number	Project Name
129 A	Donegal Heart Failure Integrated Care Service
129 B	Sligo/Leitrim/W. Cavan/Sth. Donegal /Roscommon Heart Failure Integrated Care Service
165	Integrated Ambulatory Care Heart Failure Project - Improving quality of life for patients with Heart Failure
237	Heart Failure Virtual Consultation Service with Clinical Nurse Specialist Support in the Community
248	Community based Integrated Diagnostic and Care Initiative - Reduction in referral and follow-up waiting times for Heart Failure Patients
377	Heart Failure Service Integrated Care Project - Reduced Hospital Length of Stay through Integrated Heart Failure Service
416	Integrated Heart Failure Management Programme-Improving patient outcomes and health service efficiency by comprehensive and innovative integration of care across the continuum of healthcare settings - Improving patient outcomes through integrated care for heart failure

Number	Project Name
430	Cardiology Advance Nurse Practitioner (ANP) Heart Failure - Half day reduction in length of hospital stay thanks to Advance Nursing Practitioner in Cardiology
469	Galway University Hospitals Community Cardiac Diagnostics - Reduced Waiting Times for Cardiac Diagnostic

These projects were evaluated and were found to have successfully met their targets and objectives. They have been mainstreamed and are now being funded under the Enhanced Community Care programme under NSP 2021 at a cost of €2.5 million.

Issues of an operational nature under the remit of the HSE also arise in this PQ and I have referred it to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy.

### Health Services

1319. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if he will take steps to ensure that heart failure virtual clinics will be rolled out as a priority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42456/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1320 answered with Question No. 1318.*

### Health Services

1321. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health his views on measures that will enable consultant cardiologist-led heart failure services for inpatients and outpatients in all areas as well as a dedicated cardiac physiologist as part of heart failure units; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42458/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services

1322. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if he will commit to long-term financing and resourcing for the maintenance and upkeep of an AED register; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42459/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** AEDs (defibrillators) are available in many locations across society under the management of various organisations.

The Health Service Executive (HSE) have commissioned an Out of Hospital Cardiac Arrest Strategy for Ireland.

The HSE provide training on the use of AEDs through the National Ambulance Service to Community First Responder (CFR) groups.

### Hospital Services

1323. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if he will expand cardiac rehabilitation services to be widely accessible; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42460/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services

1324. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if he will ensure adequate national capacity to deliver cardiac rehabilitation to all patients for whom it is recommended, ensuring staffing and resources are protected; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42461/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Hospital Charges

1325. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if he will remove inpatient charges for public hospital care at a cost of €30.6 million; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42462/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Patient charges are a key element of the overall funding envelope of the Irish health system and are taken into account when agreeing the Annual Estimates and the subsequent preparation of the annual National Service Plan. These charges typically include:- Out-patient charges;- Emergency Department charges;- In-patient charges; and- Long-term stay charges. Non collection of debts owed directly impacts on the affordability of services provided by the Health Service Executive in any year. 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. The Health Act 1970 (as amended) provides that all persons ordinarily resident in the country are eligible, subject to the statutory in-patient charge, to public in-patient hospital services. The current public hospital statutory in-patient charge is €80 per night, subject to a maximum of €800 in any period of twelve consecutive months. All persons accessing public in-patient services in a public hospital are liable for the statutory public in-patient charge, subject to a number of limited exemptions. There are no immediate plans to review the list of exemptions to this statutory in-patient charge. However, in line with commitments made in the Department of Health Statement of Strategy and the Sláintecare Implementation Strategy and Action Plan 2021-2023, a review of the eligibility and charges system is planned. The main objective of Sláintecare is to provide the right care, at the right place, at the right time. Eligibility and some charges have been highlighted as an obstacle to a patient's access to swift high-quality healthcare. The Sláintecare program is committed to addressing any eligibility anomalies through investigating the current eligibility structure. Sláintecare's aim is to shift the system to care for those who are in greatest need first.

### Medical Cards

1326. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if he will reduce prescription charge for medical card holders; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42463/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Prescription charges were introduced in the Health (Amendment) (No. 2) Act 2010, to address the rising costs in the General Medical Services (GMS) scheme.

Budget 2020 provided for a €0.50c reduction in prescription charges for all medical card holders. The charge was reduced by €0.50c to €1 per item for the over 70s and by €0.50c to €1.50 for persons under 70. The maximum monthly charge was also reduced to €10 and €15 respectively.

These reductions took effect from 1 November 2020.

I intend to consider any proposals for further reductions in the prescription charge in the context of the implementation of the health commitments in the Programme for Government and with regard to the funding available.

### Medicinal Products

1327. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if he will reduce the drugs payment scheme threshold to €100 per month; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42464/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Drug Payment Scheme (DPS), is aimed at individuals and families who do not have a medical card and normally would have to pay the full cost of their medication. It also applies to those who have a GP visit card. Anyone ordinarily resident in Ireland may apply to join this non means tested scheme.

On 1st of November 2020, the monthly threshold was reduced for all holders of the card from a maximum of €124 a month to its current limit of €114 per household.

I intend to consider any proposals for further reductions to the Drug Payment Scheme in the context of the implementation of the health commitments in the Programme for Government and with regard to the funding available.

### Departmental Regulations

1328. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if he will make the HSPC guidelines in relation to visits to residential care facilities statutory regulations under the powers invested in him under Health Act 2007, with those not meeting the regulations having to provide an explanation and resolve the issue within a timely manner, with the possibility of facing financial penalties for facilitates that repeatedly fail regulation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42465/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** The Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) published updated guidance on visiting in long-term residential care: *COVID-19: Normalising Visiting in Long Term Residential Care Facilities (LTRCFs)*. This guidance came 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 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.

Nursing home providers are ultimately responsible for the safe care of their residents. In a broad sense, visits to nursing homes are governed by legislation under the Health Act 2007 (Care and Welfare of Residents in Designated Centres for Older People) Regulations 2013; regulation 11 provides that the nursing home should facilitate visiting and not restrict visiting except in circumstances such as the resident requesting same, or potential risk posed from visiting – this aligns with the risk assessments referred to in the visiting guidance. The regulations also require that the nursing home has suitable facilities in place and available for residents to receive visits. It is the legal responsibility of each provider to assess the risks and mitigation measures associated with their service and how best to manage visits having regards to the specific circumstances that arise in relation to their service. The HPSC has developed public health guidance, mentioned above, to assist and support providers in this regard.

Notwithstanding the current positive epidemiological outlook and the cautious reopening of society, risks continue to remain and emergent risks such as variants of concern present ongoing challenges and the need for vigilance. Visiting arrangements should continue to take account of general public health advice and the necessary infection prevention and control measures, to reduce the risk of introduction and spread of COVID-19 and protect those living in our communities. This is particularly important in the context of the increasing prevalence of the more transmissible Delta variant. This new variant poses a significant risk, in particular to those who are not yet fully protected through vaccination.

Visitors are reminded of their responsibilities with regard to self-checks for COVID-19 in advance of visits, infection and prevention control and social interaction with all individuals, while in the nursing home.

Communications have been issued by Minister Butler emphasising the need for service providers to follow the guidance and the issue of visits continues to be monitored by HIQA as requested by Minister Butler.

The guidance will be kept under continuing review as new evidence and data emerges.

### **Departmental Meetings**

1329. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if he will meet with a group (details supplied). [42466/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** During the last year, both Minister Donnelly and I, and officials from my Department, have met with a number of groups that advocate for the interests of older people and residents of nursing homes and long-term residential care facilities. I met with representatives from the group referred to by

the Deputy on 12 July this year, with members of bereaved families in attendance, and have subsequently corresponded with the Group.

### **Nursing Homes**

1330. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if he will introduce legislation to implement best practice nursing home universal design that is dementia-friendly and suitable for family connection and quality of life during pandemics (details supplied). [42467/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** It is important to note that nursing home providers are ultimately responsible for the safe care of their residents. The Health Act 2007 (Care and Welfare of Residents in Designated Centres for Older People) Regulations 2013 as amended require that the provider shall:

- in so far as is reasonably practical, arrange to meet the needs of each resident when these have been appropriately assessed in accordance with Regulation 5.

- provide appropriate medical and health care, including a high standard of evidence-based nursing care in accordance with professional guidelines.

- make arrangements for each resident to receive visitors, having regard to any risks that may present for the resident or other residents.

- ensure that the premises of a designated centre are appropriate to the number and needs of the residents of that centre and in accordance with the statement of purpose prepared under Regulation 3.

Public health guidance has been developed in order to assist and support providers in respect of visiting long-term residential care facilities. The latest guidance which came into effect on 19 July will be kept under continuing review as new evidence and data emerges. I would also like to advise the Deputy that over the Winter 2020 period, and over Christmas 2020, the Temporary Assistance Payment Scheme was expanded on a once-off basis to allow a claim of up to €2,500 per eligible nursing home. This enabled these homes to create additional safe visiting spaces and enhance current visiting spaces.

The Deputy will be aware that the Nursing Homes Expert Panel was established, on foot of a NPHEP 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. Many of the short- and medium-term recommendations have already been implemented.

Work to progress the recommendations of the Nursing Home 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.

Scoping work is ongoing, via a multi-stakeholder process, to consider policy development for design of long-term residential care centres for older people, in line with the COVID-19 Nursing Homes Expert Panel report. HIQA regulates the minimum standards for physical infrastructure, and a wider review of the regulatory framework is planned. It will be important to consider all possible policy tools in this area, including design guidance, and the particular

needs associated with different medical conditions. I have also met with Minister Burke in the Department of Housing, and with the HSE, to discuss these issues, and this engagement is ongoing. Prominent amongst the issues discussed was the HSE's role as a prescribed body for planning applications for nursing homes, which is to be examined to ensure that any future new developments align with broader reforms in older persons care services, in addition to demographic needs.

### **State Bodies**

1331. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if he will expand and strengthen HIQA powers in relation to care home facilitates and rotate HIQA inspectors with unannounced inspections only. [42468/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** 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 to the Department 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, Minister Donnelly 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.

It is envisaged that phase 1 will bring forward interim enhancements to the primary legislative framework to enhance governance and oversight of nursing homes. The proposals will, amongst other things, provide new and enhanced enforcement powers for the Chief Inspector of Social Services, HIQA; reduce timelines and processes for regulatory actions and introduce a new reporting system for the reporting and publication of key operational data to support national planning in an integrated way and improve the information available. In January 2021 the Government approved the inclusion of a Health (Amendment) Bill 2021 on its legislative agenda. It is expected that, subject to Government approval, a draft General Scheme will be published by the end of the year in line with Sláintecare commitments, with a Bill and secondary legislation being published next year. The Department has commenced preliminary consultation with relevant stakeholders on the high-level thematic proposals.

In addition, secondary legislation will be drafted to enhance the current regulations in relation to a number of areas including infection prevention and control, governance and management and staffing.

A bilateral project group, established in October 2020 and comprising representatives from the Department and HIQA, is supporting the legislative process.

A wider review of the regulatory framework, phase 2, will commence in the second half of 2022, taking into account a programme of longer-term strategic reform considerations arising from inter alia pandemic learning with a view to exploring moving towards a service licensing system.

As the independent regulator of nursing homes, the Chief Inspector determines the appropriate approach and interventions required to monitor and ensure compliance with the regulatory framework. The Chief Inspector adopts a risk-based approach to regulation, prioritising monitoring, inspection and enforcement, based on the assessment of the risk, including the type of inspection undertaken. The approach to inspections typically includes a mix of announced

and unannounced, as required.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1332. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health his views on whether there needs to be a full public inquiry into nursing home deaths, denial of resident rights and unsafe practices during the Covid-19 pandemic with suggestions of a way forward that will safeguard and protect residents; and his further views on the need for his Department to make the inquiry public for transparency and for a national conversation on the ecology of care to take place. [42469/21]

**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 Panel was established, on foot of a NPHEP 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, although these have been affected 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.

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 under-

standing 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 is being 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 has rapidly increased in Ireland and this poses a significant risk, in particular to those who are not yet fully protected though 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.

The Government is 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.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1333. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide a non-electronic alternative to the electronic passenger locator form to facilitate those who do not have access or an understanding of the technology involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42471/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** All passengers arriving into the state are required to complete an online COVID-19 Passenger Locator Form (PLF) in accordance with SI 45 of 2021. There are limited exemptions from this requirement, as set out in the regulations, such as for international transport workers or for diplomats.

The PLF is used to support a system of engagements with arriving passengers including the targeting of public health messaging by SMS and may be used for contact tracing.

The electronic PLF is the most effective way of capturing the data required under the regulations. The electronic version represents a more sustainable and efficient method of capturing data to assist in public health efforts.

### **Health Services**

1334. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the number of episodes purchased in 2020 and to date in 2021, respectively and the average length of an episode by addiction rehabilitation and detox facility in tabular form. [42473/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

1335. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the number of beds available by addiction rehabilitation and detox facility. [42474/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Departmental Funding**

1336. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the reason his Department has still not sent funding for projects funded under the National Drugs Strategy allocation in Budget 2021 to the HSE. [42475/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** In Budget 2021, the Department of Health provided funding of €10 million for new measures under the National Drugs Strategy. The details of these measures were subsequently outlined in the HSE National Service Plan 2021. In line with existing practice, an element of this funding was held back in the Department of Health. The level of funding released during the year for delivery of the new measures is subject to the submission, review, approval and commencement of these measures. To date, the HSE has requested €6.93m of this funding, which has been approved.

In cases where the entire amount of expenditure is not expected by year end, this is largely due once off time related savings, which can be attributed to the following:

- Recruitment into designated roles, including notice period requirements resulting in actual start dates later than estimated.
- Facilities opening later than the timing assumed when planning the operational funding levels in the Budget due to delays construction timetable.
- Procurement/negotiation timelines extending longer than originally planned for when setting funding levels.

I acknowledge the work of the HSE in operationalising the business cases for the new measures announced in Budget 2021, especially taking into account the resources required to manage the public health response to Covid-19. I expect that all the new measures will have commenced by Quarter 4 this year.

### **Nursing Homes**

1337. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health if changes to the fair deal scheme introducing three year caps apply to cash assets. [42476/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** The Nursing Home Support Scheme (NHSS), commonly referred to as ‘Fair Deal’, is a system of financial support for people who require long-term residential care. The primary legislation underpinning the NHSS is the Nursing Home Support Scheme Act 2009. Participants in the NHSS contribute to the cost of their care according to their means while the State pays the balance of the cost. The Scheme aims to ensure that long-term nursing home care is accessible and affordable for everyone, and that people are cared for in the most appropriate settings.

The Nursing Homes Support Scheme (Amendment), which was signed into law on 22 July,

introduced further safeguards in the NHSS to further protect the viability and sustainability of family farms and businesses. It also includes an amendment in relation to applying the 3-year cap to the proceeds of sale of a house while a resident is in long-term care.

Within the NHSS, the asset value of a principal residence is assessed for 3 years, with 7.5% of its value going towards the cost of care. After 3 years on the scheme, the value of the property is no longer assessed. However, under previous rules, if the property was sold, the resulting cash asset was assessable in full for the entire length of stay in care. This could act as a disincentive for those who might otherwise consider selling their homes. The 2021 Act now extends the 3-year cap to cover the proceeds of sale, so that a person who sells their home will not see an increase in their contributions. Extension of the 3-year cap to the proceeds of sale is fair, is in line with the purpose of the Act, and will remove a disincentive to selling a vacant home.

Cash assets that are not the proceeds of the sale of a primary residence are not covered by the 3 year cap and these assets continue to be included in the NHSS financial assessment regardless of the amount of time an individual has spent in care.

### Covid-19 Pandemic

1338. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health if persons in quarantine who were fully vaccinated with a vaccine (details supplied) were released on appeal; if any discretion on the quarantine period is provided to those fully vaccinated with this World Health Organisation approved vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42477/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Mandatory hotel quarantine has been introduced as one element of Ireland’s public health measures to combat the transmission of COVID-19. Currently passengers travelling into Ireland who have valid proof of being vaccinated with an authorised vaccination are not required to complete mandatory hotel quarantine. Dependents, including children, will also be exempted from the requirement to complete mandatory hotel quarantine in this instance.

There are 4 European Medicines Agency (EMA)-approved vaccines currently accepted in Ireland, each of which have specific definitions for when a person is considered fully vaccinated. The following table outlines the definition of ‘fully vaccinated’ in order to qualify for an exemption from mandatory hotel quarantine.

A full course of any one of the following vaccines	Regarded as fully vaccinated after
2 doses of Pfizer-BioNtech Vaccine: BNT162b2 (Comirnaty®)	7 days
2 doses of Moderna Vaccine: CX-024414 (Moderna®)	14 days
2 doses of Oxford-AstraZeneca Vaccine: ChAdOx1-SARS-COV-2 (Vaxzevria® or Covishield)	15 days
1 dose of Johnson & Johnson/Janssen Vaccine: Ad26.COV2-S [recombinant] (Janssen®)	14 days

At present, the Sinovac vaccine has not received EMA approval. As of 07 September 2021, no appeals to mandatory hotel quarantine have been granted on the basis of persons being fully vaccinated with Sinovac. Similarly, there are no discretions applied to the quarantine period for persons vaccinated with Sinovac.

Neither myself as Minister for Health or my Department have any role in deciding which persons must enter mandatory quarantine or which persons are exempt from entering mandatory quarantine. All such decisions are to be determined in accordance with the provisions of the Act.

### **Hospital Services**

1339. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the status of the development of the central sterile services department at Roscommon Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42496/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Facilities**

1340. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 357 of 14 July 2021, the current status of the Portiuncula Hospital 50-bedroom ward block development; when this project will go to tender; the reason for the delay; if this project will make provision for a further 50-bedroom development in the future as first envisioned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42479/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Health Service Executive is responsible for the delivery of public healthcare infrastructure projects, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly in relation to this matter.

### **Hospital Facilities**

1341. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the status of the medical rehabilitation unit project at Roscommon Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42480/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Equipment**

1342. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 126 of 7 July 2021, when Portiuncula Hospital will take delivery of a new CT scanner; when the accommodation works will be completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42481/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Primary Care Centres**

1343. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients that have availed of the Portiuncula cardiac outreach service funded under a Sláintecare Integration Fund grant in each of the four primary care centres (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42483/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Portiuncula cardiac outreach service project has a cardiac investigation piece (diagnostic tests) and a nursing service piece. The

number of patients who attended a Primary Care Centre (PCC) for cardiac investigations for either an echo or a holter monitor is as follows (a small number of patients would have attended for both tests):

PCC	No. of pts
Ballinasloe	212
Portumna	42
Mountbellew	196
Monksland	185
Total	635

The integrated nursing service saw a total of 331 patients across all primary care centres. The location of each patient's 'local' PCC is noted below, but some patients may have attended more than one PCC, depending on the urgency of need to be seen and the availability of a clinic in an individual PCC:

PCC	No. of pts
Ballinasloe	113
Portumna	29
Mountbellew	68
Monksland	121
Total	331

As of 1 July, the project has successfully transitioned from the Sláintecare Integration Fund to recurrent funding from the HSE through the Enhanced Community Care (ECC) Fund.

### Hospital Facilities

1344. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the capacity of the waiting room at the modular outpatient department at Portiuncula University Hospital, Ballinasloe, County Galway; when the reconfiguration of the old outpatient department as single inpatient rooms will be completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42484/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Hospital Facilities

1345. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health his plans for the provision of a modular emergency department extension at Portiuncula University Hospital, Ballinasloe, County Galway to ensure that there is a separate stream for patients with Covid-19 or other infectious diseases; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42485/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible

### Covid-19 Pandemic

1346. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the number of consultants

who had to isolate after coming in contact with a Covid-19 positive patient; the impact this isolation has had on outpatient appointments and elective procedures; the plans if any he has to introduce systematic antigen testing of patients at points of entry to hospitals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42486/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1347 answered with Question No. 1038.*

### **Health Services**

1348. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the current waiting time for audiology appointments in counties Roscommon, Galway and Mayo for children and adults; his plans to address the waiting times; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42490/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

1349. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the steps he is taking to support the children identified in audiology misdiagnosis in counties Roscommon and Mayo; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42493/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Dental Services**

1350. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the reason dental extractions for children who require a general anaesthetic cannot be carried out at Roscommon or Portluncula Hospitals; if there are plans in place to review this situation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42504/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1351. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the way in which a person who has availed of two doses of a Covid-19 vaccine in two different EU countries can avail of the EU Digital Covid Certificate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42508/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Under the EU regulation ((EU) 2021/953) Digital COVID Certificate are issued in the EU country where the medical event took place. In cases where a person has received a vaccine in two separate EU countries, they should apply for a Digital COVID Certificate in the country where they received their second dose of the vaccine.

In cases where the EU country issuing the Digital COVID Certificate after the second dose requires proof of the first, individuals may request a single dose vaccination certificate as proof from the country of issue

*Question No. 1352 answered with Question No. 1217.*

### **Mental Health Services**

1353. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on a waiting list for mental health services by CHO and age category; and the breakdown by the length of time they have been waiting in tabular form.; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42514/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Mental Health Services**

1354. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the reason data on adult mental health waiting lists is not captured nationally; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42515/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

1355. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health further to commitments given by his predecessor to Dáil Éireann on 10 December 2019 on Report Stage of the Health Insurance (Amendment) Bill 2019, if he will outline the engagement to date between his Department and Health Insurance Authority on the exclusion of coverage of level 2 hospitals by an insurance provider; his plans to review those regulations in respect to the exclusion of level 2 hospitals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42520/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Health Insurance Authority (HIA) has carried out two reviews of the Minimum Benefit Regulations in recent years, first in 2010 and then in 2016. Following Minister Harris' commitment to review the regulations on foot of the Deputy's query in 2019, Department officials contacted the HIA in respect of the clause pertaining to coverage of public hospitals. The HIA advised that their reviews included consideration of this issue and they are satisfied that there should be no change to this provision of the regulations. This position has become more relevant with the introduction of Sláintecare which aims to exclude all private practice from public hospitals. These matters are being kept under review by the HIA and Department officials on an ongoing basis and in line with government policy on healthcare and health insurance.

### **Hospital Services**

1356. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients seen by the rapid access haematuria clinic at Roscommon University Hospital; the cancer detection rate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42525/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** A pilot Rapid Access Haematuria Clinic (RAHC) has been in operation in Roscommon University Hospital since December 2018. Patients who have symptoms of blood in the urine can be referred to this clinic, which aims to see patients in line with the national clinical guideline for urgent assessment within 28 days.

While the clinic has continued to run throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, the HSE's National Cancer Control Programme has advised that the most recent data available is for 2019.

In 2019, a total of 419 patients were seen in the clinic. Of these, 70% were seen and treated in one visit, and 100% were seen within the national clinical guideline for urgent assessment within 28 days.

In 2019, 10% of patients who attended the RAHC were diagnosed with cancer.

### **Ambulance Service**

1357. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Questions Nos. 583 of 17 December 2020, 646 of 3 February 2021 and 160 of 7 July 2021, the reason that the HSE has refused to disclose the location of the 18 ambulatory care hubs; if his Department has been provided with locations for some or all of these hubs; if so, the locations of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42534/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Equipment**

1358. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the hospitals which had a TRASNA telemedicine stroke machine installed; the number of times the equipment was used in the past 12 months in each hospital; the corresponding figure for use in stroke diagnostics; the plans if any to replace the equipment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42535/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Disability Services**

1359. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health if the Strengthening Disability Services Fund of €20 million announced in 2020 has been distributed in full; if not, the amount currently available in the fund; and the number of organisations that have received moneys from the fund. [42540/21]

1360. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health if the Strengthening Disability Services Fund of €20 million announced in 2020 has been distributed in full; if not the amount currently available in the fund; and the number of organisations that have received moneys from the fund. [42541/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1359 and 1360 together.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1360 answered with Question No. 1359.*

### Medical Cards

1361. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health if the PCRS will re-issue a breakdown of the income and outgoings in relation to the decision that was made on a medical card application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42551/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible

### Health Service Executive

1362. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health when the HSE IT systems will be back to normal service; and when Members can resubmit parliamentary questions on HSE operational issues for answer (details supplied). [42558/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Since the cyberattack, our colleagues in ICT, along with their counterparts in the HSE and OGCIO have been working diligently to restore the PQ referral system to the HSE. This work has been completed and we can now begin referring PQs to the HSE once more.

The majority of IT systems have also been restored within the HSE but access to historical data can still be a challenge and may be more time consuming in certain instances. This may impact how quickly we can respond to certain PQs but this will need to be addressed on a case by case basis.

### Health Services

1363. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health the amount paid by University Hospital Kerry in external consultancy fees relating to microbiology. [42572/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services

1364. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health the monthly spend on antibiotic treatments in University Hospital Kerry for 2021 year to date in tabular form. [42573/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## **Workplace Relations Commission**

1365. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health further to the WRC Labour Court Recommendation LCR22195 on interim compensation for travel the reason the HSE is now seeking repayment of overpaid travel hours that have been paid to HSE home support workers since that judgment was issued; the reason this refund was sought in 2021 when travel payments post the LRC decision were paid in arrears; if it is the case that a delay in the HSE revising their payment systems has now lead to the request for repayments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42582/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Service Executive**

1366. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the total amount of money sought by the HSE from home support workers for travel compensation since 1 March 2020; the number of persons involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42583/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **General Practitioner Services**

1367. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that Southdoc have reneged on their commitment to a full return to service in their Blackpool facility and will instead operate curtailed hours. [42593/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1368. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health the due diligence his Department and the HSE took to ensure that any personal protective equipment procured by the State during the Covid-19 pandemic had not been made using slave or forced labour and was of a sufficient standard to ensure a proper protection level in view of a report in the UK (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42594/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1369. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health his advice regarding school children under 13 years of age having to wear a mask (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42595/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Deputy is advised that the NPHET

for COVID-19 is currently considering updated advice provided by the HIQA on the policy question:

The HIQA issued previous advice to the NPHEt on this matter on 8 April and 3 March 2021 respectively, available here: [www.hiqa.ie/reports-and-publications/health-technology-assessment/reducing-minimum-age-mask-wearing](http://www.hiqa.ie/reports-and-publications/health-technology-assessment/reducing-minimum-age-mask-wearing)

For both the advice issued on 3 March and 8 April 2021, and subsequently endorsed by the NPHEt, the HIQA recommended that there should be no change in the minimum age for requirements and recommendations with respect to mask use in the community. In making this recommendation, it was recognised that the potential benefits of a requirement or recommendation for children to wear face masks must outweigh concerns regarding potential harms associated with face mask use.

The NPHEt will consider the latest updated HIQA advice at its next meeting, scheduled for mid-September. The Minister for Health will be informed of the NPHEt's recommendation(s) on same in the usual manner after the NPHEt meeting.

### **Hospital Services**

1370. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider reinstating the phlebotomy service at Peamount Hospital (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42598/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

1371. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter regarding the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42600/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

1372. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health if he will implement the calls from a group (details supplied) for increased investment in a number of areas costed at €85 million as part of Budget 2022; if he will make mental health a priority in the budget; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42605/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I recently received Mental Health Reform's Pre-Budget 2022 submission. I value their input - they play an important role in raising awareness and advocating for improvements to mental health service delivery.

I am giving detailed consideration to the submission, in consultation as appropriate with other relevant areas within the Department and with the HSE. More broadly, the Department is engaging in dialogue with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the HSE in relation to the 2021 Estimates. Until these discussions are concluded it would not be appropriate for me to comment on this matter.

I would note for the Deputy that 2021 saw a record budget for mental health of over €1.1 billion, including €23 million to commence implementation of many of the short-term recommendations of *Sharing the Vision* in 2021 and the HSE National Service Plan. I am committed to ensuring that Budget 2022 builds on this progress.

### **Disability Services**

1373. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the case of a person (details supplied). [42614/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Staff**

1374. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the number of staff by role that would be considered a full cohort by area and team in the new CDNTs in Cork; and the number of staff currently employed in tabular form. [42616/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Commissions of Inquiry**

1375. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health the status of the sodium valproate inquiry announced in November 2020; when the terms of reference will be published, the make-up of the membership of the inquiry; when the inquiry will be established; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42626/21]

**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.

### **Departmental Data**

1376. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the cost of developing a na-

tional strategies inclusive of such costs as public and sectoral consultations, consultant fees and other ancillary costs based on the latest three strategies which his Department has published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42631/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The process of developing national strategies can vary significantly according to the level of public and private national/international consultation, consultancy and other ancillary costs. Prior costs are not necessarily a reliable indicator of future costs with respect to an as yet unidentified new national strategy.

### **Hospital Waiting Lists**

1377. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the current waiting times for MRI scans for the Mater Hospital, Dublin 7; the steps being taken to address the backlog with MRI scans and to improve the waiting times; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42636/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the issues raised by the Deputy relate to operational matters I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

1378. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients waiting for audiology appointments per county or the nearest geographical division currently; the corresponding figures for each of the years 2016 to 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42640/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

1379. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients currently awaiting audiology appointments in the Cavan Monaghan region for periods of less than six months, between six months and one year, one and two years, between two and three years and for more than three years, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42641/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

1380. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients currently awaiting audiology appointments in the Cavan Monaghan region that are under 18 years of age; the number that are over 18 years of age; the measures he is implementing to reduce the waiting periods for these patients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42642/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked

the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Dental Services**

1381. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the measures that are being put in place to ensure that medical card holders have access to services under the dental treatment scheme; if his attention has been drawn to the increasing difficulties that medical card holders have in accessing services and treatment given that a significant number of dental practices are opting out of the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42645/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Dentists must give three months' notice of withdrawal from the Dental Treatment Services Scheme (DTSS). I expect dentists to continue to honour their ethical and contractual obligations to patients, including during their notice period, to provide a service or to ensure that patients are referred to another dentist who will provide a service. HSE local services will assist anyone experiencing problems in accessing a service.

The DTSS makes available the following dental treatments to medical card holders: Oral examination; Prophylaxis (scale and polish); Restorations (fillings); Exodontics (extractions); Surgical extractions; Miscellaneous (e.g. control of haemorrhage); Endodontics (root canal therapy); Apicectomy (amputation of roots); Protracted periodontal (gum) treatment; Radiographs; Prosthetics (dentures). These treatments are provided by independent dental practitioners who have a contract with the HSE. Some are available on demand, for example, all medical card holders may avail of specific dental treatments e.g., a dental examination, two fillings in each calendar year, extractions, as necessary.

The remaining care provision is subject to the prior approval of a dental surgeon in the HSE, who prioritises for high risk and exceptional patients; those requiring emergency care and patients considered to have greater clinical urgency and/or necessity in receiving care.

### **Departmental Data**

1382. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the amount of public funding that an organisation (details supplied) has received from Government Departments between 2013 and 2021, inclusive in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42648/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Departmental Data**

1383. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the number of HSE audits that have been carried out on an organisation (details supplied) since 2013; the dates of these audits; the findings of these audits; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42649/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## Health Service Executive

1384. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health if he plans to investigate procurement procedures within the HSE to determine if there are any instances of the HSE being overcharged by private and voluntary service providers. [42680/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## Child Abuse

1385. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if any retrospective complaints have been made regarding the sexual abuse of minors in a hospital (details supplied) which may have occurred from the late 1970s until the end of the 1990s; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42681/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## Flexible Work Practices

1386. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Health the steps being taken to facilitate remote working within his Department in particular to encourage remote working for those who live in the regions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42709/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Departments and Offices are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

My Department has established an internal Blended Working Group involving key Corporate functional areas which is examining the practical implications of facilitating blended working by staff in the Department of Health. This will be ongoing over the coming months and will take account of central policy on remote working from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. As part of that, an application process will be put in place at the appropriate time.

In line with the Government campaign - #MakingRemoteWork – I am supportive of facilitating all reasonable and practical applications for blended working, while ensuring the continued effective and efficient delivery of the Department's business.

## Legislative Measures

1387. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the status of and his plans regarding the statutory homecare bill; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42723/21]

1388. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the status of his Department's review of and plans regarding the deferred private members' professional homecare bill;

and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42724/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1387 and 1388 together.

Enabling people with care-needs to continue to live independently at home for as long as possible is a priority for the Government. To advance this, the Government is committed to establishing a new, statutory scheme for the financing and regulation of home-support services, which the Department of Health is currently developing.

Work is on-going within the Department to determine the optimal approach to the development of the new scheme within the broader context of the Sláintecare reforms. This work encompasses the development of the regulatory framework for the new scheme; the examination of the options for the financing model for the scheme; and the development of a reformed model of service-delivery.

With the aim of ensuring that all service-users are provided with a standard, high-quality level of care which is safe, effective, and person-centred, it is envisaged that the regulatory framework will comprise (i) primary legislation for the licensing of public and private home support providers; (ii) minimum requirements (regulations); and HIQA National Standards for Home Support Services.

On 27 April 2021, Government gave approval to draft a General Scheme and Heads of a Bill to establish a licensing framework for home support providers. This is being progressed by the Department with a view to bringing it through the Houses of the Oireachtas at the earliest opportunity. It is expected that the primary legislation will give the Minister for Health the power to make regulations in respect of minimum requirements which will form the criteria against which a provider's eligibility to hold a licence will be determined.

In parallel to this, work is ongoing in relation to the development of a reformed model of service delivery for home support. Within this context, funding was secured in 2021 for the HSE to progress the roll-out of interRAI as the standard assessment tool for care-needs in the community; the pilot of a reformed model of service-delivery for home-support; and the establishment of a National Office for Home Support Services.

Mobilisation of the pilot of a reformed model of service-delivery is expected to commence in September, supported by the National Office. The pilot will deliver an additional 230,000 hours of home-support in four community healthcare network (CHN) sites over a six-month period. In addition, approximately 130 posts have been funded for the national rollout of the interRAI Ireland system, which the home-support pilot will test as the standard assessment tool for care-needs.

The *Sláintecare Implementation Strategy and Action Plan 2021–2023* commits to the advancement of the development of the new home-support scheme in 2021 and to the commencement of its implementation in 2022. While the new home-support scheme is under development, the Government is prioritising improving access to home-support services. As part of Budget 2021, funding for an additional 5 million hours of home-support was provided. This increased investment will contribute to meeting the *Programme for Government* commitment to providing equitable access to home-support services.

*Question No. 1388 answered with Question No. 1387.*

## Medical Aids and Appliances

1389. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Health when diabetics over the age of 21 years will receive Libre FreeStyle Sensors under the medical card, long-term illness or hardship scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42726/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Flexible Work Practices

1390. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the way in which his Department and public bodies and agencies under his remit are accommodating requests for persons to work from home. [42759/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The public service, including my own Department and agencies under the aegis of my Department are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months, and after that it is expected that the public service will follow suit. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office/agency, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across the sectors. My Department has established an internal Blended Working Group involving key Corporate functional areas which is examining the practical implications of facilitating blended working by staff in the Department of Health. This will be ongoing over the coming months and will take account of central policy on remote working from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. An application process will form part of the Framework, and this will be put in place at the appropriate time. In line with the Government campaign - #MakingRemoteWork – I am supportive of facilitating all reasonable and practical applications for blended working, while ensuring the continued effective and efficient delivery of business.

### Health Services

1391. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health his plans to allocate funding in Budget 2022 for the establishment of a State-funded contraception scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42780/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** Following the recommendations of the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, a Working Group on Access to Contraception was established in April 2019 to consider the range of policy, regulatory and legislative issues arising in relation to improving access to contraception in Ireland.

The Group's report, which was published in October 2019, identified the barriers that exist to accessing contraception and the mechanisms available to overcome those barriers.

The report is available online at:

<https://assets.gov.ie/38063/89059243e750415ebf7e96247a4225ae.pdf>

The findings of this report made clear that a sizable body of work needs to be addressed in order to develop and finalise the policy approach, bring forward the necessary legislative proposals and ensure the implementation of service delivery arrangements.

The need to focus on and prioritise the response to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has unfortunately delayed progress on this issue. It is, however, important to stress that my Department and this Government remain committed to providing free contraception over a phased basis, starting with women aged 17 – 25, as set out in the Programme for Government. Accordingly, we have established a Contraception Implementation Group, which held its first meeting on the 28th July and will oversee implementation of the Programme for Government commitment.

In the meantime, access to free contraception is already enabled to some contexts, through the National Condom Distribution Service (NCDS), which was established by the HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme (SHCPP) in October 2015.

The NCDS functions as a central point for distributing free condoms and lubricant sachets to HSE services and other organisations working with individuals and groups at increased risk of negative sexual health outcomes. The NCDS was expanded to 3rd level campuses in 2019 and will continue to operate in this context as Covid-19 restrictions are lifted and students return to in-person tuition.

It should also be noted that those with a GMS (medical) card already have access to most forms of contraception free of charge. Those with a GP visit card are supported to some extent as the clinical cost element of contraception is reduced. The Drugs Payment Scheme, for which anyone ordinarily resident in Ireland is eligible, covers the cost of prescription items above a limit of €114 per month.

However, I am very conscious that, for those who do not qualify for a medical card, cost can be a barrier to accessing their preferred or most appropriate form of contraception. As such, Minister Donnelly, myself and our Department remain committed to providing free contraception over a phased period, starting with women aged 17-25, as set out in the Programme for Government.

### **Care of the Elderly**

1392. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health if he will ensure the resumption of all daycare services for elderly people in community hospitals immediately. [42781/21]

**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 and the reopening of these centres are a priority for me. The HSE continues to actively work on reopening day care centres for older people as a priority in line with current public health guidance. As this is an operational matter I have referred the Deputy's Question to the HSE For direct reply.

### **Assisted Human Reproduction**

1393. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the steps he is taking to amend the Assisted Human Reproduction (AHR) Bill as a result of the Special Rapporteur's report, Review of Children's Rights and Best Interests in the Context of Assisted Human Reproduction (AHR) and Surrogacy in Irish Law. [42782/21]

1398. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the steps he is taking to amend and update the Children and Family Relationships Act 2015 as a result of the Special Rapporteur's report, Review of Children's Rights and Best Interests in the Context of Assisted Human

Reproduction (AHR) and Surrogacy in Irish Law. [42787/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1393 and 1398 together.

The report of the Special Rapporteur on Child Protection published earlier this year comprises issues relating to parentage and the right to identity in donor-assisted human reproduction (DAHR) and surrogacy, carried out in this jurisdiction and abroad. Surrogacy and DAHR undertaken abroad give rise to a range of legal, ethical and social issues, and concern areas of law that intersect across the remits of several Government Departments. My Department is engaging with the Department of Justice and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in respect of these policy areas.

### Hospital Services

1394. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health if he will ensure that all maternity hospitals put in place safe procedures for nominated support partners to attend for all stages of labour including induction of labour and or early labour. [42783/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Abortion Services

1395. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the status of the safe access to termination of pregnancy bill. [42784/21]

1415. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Health the steps that have been taken to date to introduce safe access zone legislation to stop the practices of protests and vigils outside medical premises; when this legislation will be introduced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42879/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1395 and 1415 together.

The Programme for Government ‘Our Shared Future’ contains a commitment to “Establish exclusion zones around medical facilities” and the Minister is committed to ensuring safe access to termination of pregnancy services. Ensuring access to termination of pregnancy services remains an ongoing priority for the Department of Health.

Since services under the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 commenced in January 2019, there has been a limited number of reports of protests or any other actions relating to termination of pregnancy. The Department of Health is in regular contact with the HSE and has liaised with An Garda Síochána on safe access to services.

The Garda National Protective Services Bureau issued a notice to all Garda stations raising awareness about the issue. It directed that any protests be monitored, and breaches of existing law dealt with. The Department has provided information on existing public order and other relevant legislation to the HSE for appropriate distribution to services that provide termination of pregnancy.

Officials in my Department continue to prioritise safe access to termination of pregnancy

services and to examine legislative options in this area.

*Question No. 1396 answered with Question No. 1036.*

### **Mental Health Services**

1397. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons currently in the acute adult mental health psychiatric units in Cork University Hospital and Mercy University Hospital whose discharges from hospital have been delayed by one, two, three, four and more than five years, respectively; the number of these persons whose hospital discharge has been delayed as a result of a lack of appropriate follow-on accommodation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42786/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1398 answered with Question No. 1393.*

*Question No. 1399 answered with Question No. 1036.*

### **Cannabis for Medicinal Use**

1400. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the implications of the Court of Justice of the European Union ruling in case C-663/18 for Irish legislation concerning cannabidiol. [42791/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The matters raised are currently the subject of a legal challenge and consequently, being sub-judice, I am not in a position to offer further comment.

*Question No. 1401 answered with Question No. 996.*

### **Health Services**

1402. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if he will advise on a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied) in relation to specialist care; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42833/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1403. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE will report on the number of Covid-19 related deaths on a daily basis. [42834/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Regular reporting of deaths related to COVID-19 are provided through the following information sources. The Department of Health provides updates on mortality related to COVID-19 on a weekly basis (updated cumulative to-

tal) through press statements and the cumulative number of deaths is also updated on a weekly basis on the COVID-19 Geohive, including the newly notified deaths over the previous week.

[covid19ireland-geohive.hub.arcgis.com/](https://covid19ireland-geohive.hub.arcgis.com/) <[https://urldefense.com/v3/https://covid19ireland-geohive.hub.arcgis.com/\\_\\_;!!CfJOjA!We2qVAex6DHsL\\_XOSxkbAvnmKESUES-cL86QQ6AvgvIQTO0RmM0mu7HPDrBEF0GjZug\\$](https://urldefense.com/v3/https://covid19ireland-geohive.hub.arcgis.com/__;!!CfJOjA!We2qVAex6DHsL_XOSxkbAvnmKESUES-cL86QQ6AvgvIQTO0RmM0mu7HPDrBEF0GjZug$)> In addition, the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) publish a weekly COVID-19 deaths report through the following link. This provides additional epidemiological information on COVID-19 related deaths notified over the previous week as well as since the outset of the pandemic, including information about the month of occurrence of the death. [www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/surveillance/weeklyreporton-covid-19deathsreportedinireland/](http://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/surveillance/weeklyreporton-covid-19deathsreportedinireland/).

### Ambulance Service

1404. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the progress made to date in providing improved ambulance and ancillary emergency care to persons in Connemara, County Galway; the process that will be followed in putting extra resources into the National Ambulance Service services in Connemara; the method that will be followed in selecting a location for a base for the new vehicles to be provided in Connemara; the details of the consultation that will take place in this regard with local stakeholders; when the new service will be operable; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42841/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I am happy to advise the Deputy that in recent weeks I have approved a funding proposal for the augmentation of National Ambulance Service (NAS) resources in Connemara in 2021, in line with a demand analysis undertaken by the NAS.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services

1405. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health if he will clarify the future of Sruthan House, Dundalk, County , with respect to the recently announced Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting plan to end Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42847/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Cannabis for Medicinal Use

1406. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Health if discussions are expected for the approval of a cannabis-based product (details supplied) owing to the fact that it is greatly helping many persons with epilepsy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42855/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I have been informed by the Health Products Regulatory Authority that no application has been made from any prospective supplier

looking to add PCBD110 to the Medical Cannabis Access Programme (MCAP).

Prospective suppliers of products to the Medical Cannabis Access Programme (MCAP) can apply to the Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA), acting on behalf of the Minister for Health, to have a cannabis product considered for inclusion in the schedule to the Misuse of Drugs (Prescription and Control of Supply of Cannabis for Medical Use) Regulations 2019.

Applicants must provide evidence to demonstrate that the proposed cannabis product meets the requirements of a 'specified controlled drug' as defined in the MCAP legislation. The onus is on prospective suppliers to submit applications to the HPRA.

### Mental Health Services

1407. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Health if discussions are expected regarding the budget for mental health given the impact Covid-19 has had on mental health and given that services are extremely stretched; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42856/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** The development of all aspects of mental health services remains a priority for Government. This is reflected in the current Programme for Government, the new policy, *Sharing the Vision - A Mental Health Policy for Everyone*, and the significant additional funding given to HSE Mental Health services in Budget 2021.

2021 saw a record budget for mental health of over €1.1 billion, including €23 million to commence implementation of many of the short-term recommendations of *Sharing the Vision* in 2021 and the HSE National Service Plan. I am committed to ensuring that Budget 2022 builds on this progress.

While there is no doubt that Covid-19 has posed significant challenges, including isolation, bereavement, anxiety and loss of income and work for many, we do not yet fully understand the impact of Covid-19 on mental health and subsequent demand on services. A negative mental health outcome from the pandemic is not inevitable, if we respond in a cohesive manner.

Since the pandemic started, mental health services have responded rapidly, continuing to deliver supports in the safest possible way throughout the country. 2021 also saw an additional €15 million allocated for measures in response to Covid-19 enabling the HSE and the Department to continue to plan for any surge in demand for mental health services and supports as it arises. The HSE have service surge capacity plans in place, including access to acute beds in the private sector.

The HSE has a range of proactive responses for any rise in mental health service needs, including online and other telehealth psychosocial supports. In 2020, an additional €2.2 million was allocated to develop telehealth and psychosocial responses to Covid-19. Telehealth services are now fully established while the HSE Psychosocial Framework, published in January 2021, provides a cohesive, coordinated, consistent and collaborative whole-of-population approach to the provision of mental health services and supports.

My Department is engaging in dialogue with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the Health Service Executive in relation to the 2021 Estimates. Until these discussions are concluded it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on this matter

## Home Help Service

1408. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting for home help that are waiting for additional hours or new applications, respectively by county; the length of time waiting; the number of home help shortages throughout the country; the number of new home help support workers recruited over the past two years; the immediate efforts being taken to reduce waiting times; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42858/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## Medical Cards

1409. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health the way in which the non-medical card patients of a general practitioner (details supplied) can be transferred to another practice as a matter of urgency since only medical card patients were reassigned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42859/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Under the GMS scheme, the HSE contracts GPs to provide medical services without charge to eligible persons, persons who hold a medical card or a GP visit card. GPs are reimbursed by the HSE for the provision of those services. The HSE may assign an eligible person to another GP where their GP is resigning or where their GP's GMS contract is otherwise terminated. In addition, where an eligible person wishes to change their GP themselves, they may make a request for transfer to the HSE.

People who do not hold a medical card or GP visit card access GP services on a private basis and can make enquiries directly to any GP practice they wish to register with. As private practitioners, it is a matter for each individual GP to decide whether to accept additional private patients. Neither my Department or the HSE have a role in transferring private patients to another GP practice.

## Hospital Staff

1410. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the actions being taken regarding conditions and understaffing at Mayo University Hospital, Castlebar; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42863/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## Hospital Appointments Status

1411. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) from County Donegal will receive a rheumatology appointment for Our Lady's Hospital, Manorhamilton; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42865/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a ser-

vice matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Mental Health Services**

1412. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the areas in which the additional €10 million allocated to mental health due to the impact of Covid-19 in 2021 announced in February 2021 has been spent to date in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42868/21]

1413. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the breakdown of expenditure of the €10 million allocated to mental health due to the impact of Covid-19 in 2021 announced in February 2021 spent to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42869/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1412 and 1413 together.

In February, an Taoiseach announced that €10 million in funding would be made available to meet the projected increase in demand for mental health supports arising from Covid-19 as part of Covid-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead. This funding provision was made available as a once-off measure.

My officials have been working with their counterparts in the HSE to identify and develop proposals for where such funding could best be used. While work is ongoing to finalise proposals, indicative areas for consideration have been identified. These include enhanced signposting and access to existing mental health services, increased channels for signposting, increased provision for service delivery, psychosocial response planning at CHO level, and initiatives for children and young people of school age, at third level and in non-education settings. Options for a research, monitoring and evaluation piece are also being examined.

I am closely monitoring work on the proposals and it is envisaged that initiatives will be starting in Quarter 4 2021. Officials in my Department, those in the HSE and I are working hard to ensure measures across the priority areas identified are implemented as soon as possible. *Question No. 1413 answered with Question No. 1412.*

### **Mental Health Services**

1414. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the amount of the 2021 budget for mental health that has been spent in 2021; if he will report on any funding still to be allocated or spent to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42870/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1415 answered with Question No. 1395.*

### **Health Services**

1416. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if an appointment will

be expedited for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42882/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services

1417. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter regarding the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42883/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Vaccination Programme

1418. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the measures being considered to encourage maximum take-up of the 2021 winter flu vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42893/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The HSE is in the advanced stages of planning the 2021/2022 Influenza Vaccination programme. It is anticipated immunisations will begin in early October and will be available free of charge to adults in specified at-risk groups and children aged from 2 to 17 years of age.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services

1419. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the measures being considered to prepare hospitals for the winter season; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42894/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Government allocated an unprecedented investment of €600 million to support the roll out of the Winter Plan 2020/2021. The Plan provided additional permanent acute bed capacity, additional home support hours, additional community-based services and an expanded flu vaccination programme to alleviate pressure on hospital emergency departments (EDs).

The HSE is currently working on developing a plan to deal with the additional pressures on hospital EDs during the winter months. The plan will be developed, within allocated resources, in the context of the additional challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Details of the

2021/22 Winter Plan will be published in due course. The HSE is also in the advanced stages of planning the 2021/2022 Influenza Vaccination Programme. It is anticipated that immunisations will begin in early October and will be available free of charge to adults in specified at-risk groups and children aged from 2 to 17 years of age.

The plan will build on the significant resources put in place under the winter plan for 20/21 which provided additional permanent acute bed capacity, additional home support hours, additional community-based services and an expanded flu vaccination programme to alleviate pressure on hospital emergency departments (EDs) and targeted initiatives to address population health needs which combine the need to shift care to home and ambulatory care environments, especially for high-risk cohorts such as elderly patients and those with chronic illnesses.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1420. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health his plans to exempt those under 18 years old from contact tracing specifically in cases in which it matters to the school environment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42907/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** There are no plans at present to exempt children from contact tracing. Contact tracing is an important element in controlling the spread of SARS-Cov-2 and is kept under continuing review by the Department, the HSE and the Health Protection Surveillance Centre. Details regarding the current guidance in place are available at <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/covid19/contact-tracing/>

### **Government Communications**

1421. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health if his ministerial phones have been hacked or attempted to be hacked during his term of office. [42927/21]

1422. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health if he has ever used his personal phones for Government business; and if so, if the personal phones have been hacked during his term of office. [42945/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1421 and 1422 together.

No hacking incident or attempt at hacking has been identified.

### **Freedom of Information**

1423. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health the number of freedom of information requests responded to by his Department in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; the number of responses that included documents related to text messages and other phone message communications such as messages sent through an application (details supplied) in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42967/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The following table sets out, as of 06 September 2021, the number of Freedom of Information requests processed in my Department from 2016 to date\*.

9 September 2021

YEAR	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021*
NUMBER OF REQUESTS PROCESSED	317	351	480	582	465	235*

Please be advised that data on the specific types of documents released in each individual FOI request is not collated by the Department.

### Hospital Services

1424. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of intensive care beds that have been provided since he announced the expansion of critical care capacity to 446 beds in December 2020; the locations in which these beds have been provided; the timescale for providing the outstanding beds; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42977/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** At the start of last year, permanent adult critical care capacity in Ireland stood at 255 beds, according to the National Office of Clinical Audit. Funding for a further 40 adult critical care beds was provided on a temporary basis in March 2020 as part of the response to Covid-19 in March 2020.

A Strategic Plan for Critical Care was noted by Government in December 2020. This Plan aims to increase capacity to 321 by end-2021 and to 446 in the longer term. Funding of €52m provided for 2021 will see the 40 beds provided in 2020 retained permanently and a further 26 added, to bring permanent baseline capacity to 321 by the end of 2021. The HSE has advised that 41 of these 66 beds are now in place, with the number open on any particular day fluctuating as a result of a variety of factors.

Regarding the locations of these beds, as this is an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly.

### Hospital Appointments Status

1425. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of a hospital appointment for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42987/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Commissions of Inquiry

1426. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the cost of each commission of investigation under the remit of his Department over the preceding decade. [42994/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** My Department has only instituted 1

commission of investigation in this time period, the Commission of Investigation (certain matters relative to a disability service in the South East and related matters), “The Farrelly Commission”. Since its establishment in 2017 this commission has incurred costs of €5,640,451.97.

### **Dental Services**

1427. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health the advice he can provide about a dental services issue (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43003/21]

**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. The HSE will assist anyone experiencing problems accessing a service.

The approach to future oral health service provision will be aligned with *Smile agus Sláinte*, the National Oral Health Policy (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 of the DTSS, but recognise that it needs to be aligned with the new Policy. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the roll-out of the National Oral Health Policy to be delayed, and the proposed review of the DTSS contract to be deferred. However, officials in my Department and from the HSE are currently engaging with the Irish Dental Association on matters relating to the provision of services under the DTSS.

### **Dental Services**

1428. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of dentists in County Tipperary currently participating in the dental medical card scheme; and his plans to address the number of dentists leaving the scheme which has left medical card patients in many areas with no access to dental treatment. [43004/21]

**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. The HSE will assist anyone experiencing problems accessing a service.

The approach to future oral health service provision will be aligned with *Smile agus Sláinte*, the National Oral Health Policy (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 of the DTSS, but recognise that it needs to be aligned with the new Policy. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the roll-out of the National Oral Health Policy to be delayed, and the proposed review of the DTSS contract to be deferred. However, Officials in my Department and from the HSE are currently engaging with the Irish Dental Association on matters relating to the provision of services under the DTSS.

I have asked the HSE to forward the figures requested to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **General Practitioner Services**

1429. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health the arrangements in place for general practitioner cover in circumstances in which general practitioners take annual leave; and if these arrangements are in place in respect of a general practitioner (details supplied). [43008/21]

1431. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health the arrangements that are in place for general practitioner cover in cases in which a general practitioner takes annual leave; and if these arrangements are in place in respect of a general practitioner (details supplied) based in County Kerry. [43018/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1429 and 1431 together.

Under the terms of the GMS contract, a medical practitioner is entitled to take a number of weeks annual leave each year based on his/her average GMS panel size. The maximum entitlement being five weeks or 35 days for those with a GMS panel of 1,500 patients or more and minimum being two weeks or 14 days for those with GMS panels of 100 patients. GPs may apply for reimbursement in respect of a contribution towards the employment of a locum during leave periods. Annual leave entitlement does not apply to GPs with GMS panels of less than 100 patients.

GPs must obtain the prior approval of the HSE CHO before taking annual leave. Should a GP be unable to obtain the services of a locum for periods of annual leave, the CHO, on request, will arrange locum cover where possible. Such a request should normally be submitted to the CHO at least four weeks prior to commencement of the leave period.

In relation to the arrangements referred to by the Deputy, as these are service matters, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **General Practitioner Services**

1430. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 2447 of 27 July 2021, the position with regard to securing a general practitioner for a location (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43015/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1431 answered with Question No. 1429.*

### **Hospital Services**

1432. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health the arrangements that prevail with respect to an MRI scanner within University Hospital Kerry operated by a company (details supplied). [43019/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Registration of Nurses**

1433. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the current processing times

for applications for registration with the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland by general nurses who trained in the UK; if delays are being experienced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43050/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland (NMBI) has processed 210 applications from UK trained nurses since 01/10/2020. Of these, 81% were processed in under 90 days.

NMBI have stated that they recognise that there are currently some delays in processing applications from nurses who trained in the UK, for which they apologise. This is being caused by a number of factors such as the fact that additional confirmation and verification is now required from some UK trained nurses, as the UK is no longer part of the EU.

NMBI recognises the urgency in processing and progressing all applications and intensive efforts are underway to speed up the processing timelines, including the allocation of additional resources to the process. NMBI note that recognition and registration processing times vary for each individual application.

### **Dental Services**

1434. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Health the reason the medical card scheme does not cover the cost of dental care for 12 to 16-year-olds; and if he has plans to change same. [43053/21]

**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. Dental care for children under 16 is provided by the Public Dental Service of the HSE. Emergency care is provided for all children under 16. In addition, targeted screening and prevention is provided for school children at certain dental developmental milestones and for special needs groups.

Smile agus Sláinte, the National Oral Health Policy (2019), sets out Government policy regarding oral health services. Under the Policy, all children up to 16 years will have available to them eight oral healthcare packages consisting of examinations, assessments, advice, prevention interventions, emergency care and referral as appropriate. The packages will be provided in a primary care setting by oral healthcare practitioners contracted by the HSE and will be introduced incrementally.

### **Health Services**

1435. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if additional funding will be deployed in budget 2022 to address the unprecedented backlog in cancer service demands; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43057/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As part of Budget 2021, an extra €20m has been allocated for the continued implementation of the National Cancer Strategy this year. This funding is being used to facilitate developments across prevention, diagnosis, treatment and patient supports.

Additional funding of €12m has also been allocated this year for the restoration of cancer services. This funding is being used to support hospitals in addressing backlogs, extending clinic times, providing additional clinics, increasing diagnostic capacity and providing locum/temporary support.

Decisions on the funding of cancer services next year will be made in the context of the Estimates process for 2022.

### **Cybersecurity Policy**

1436. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health the work he has undertaken to address cyber-security measures faced by the Health Service Executive to prevent further cyber-attacks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43058/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Funding has been provided in 2021 to address the immediate risks to the HSE including the recovery of systems and data affected by the attack and the establishment of a Security Operations Centre (SOC) on an interim basis. The SOC will be established on a longer term basis once the necessary procurements process are complete. My officials are also ensuring funding for cyber for 2022 and beyond is being incorporated into plans for next year.

As the actual response to cyber attack and technical and operational changes required to address it in 2021 and reduce the risk of further attack is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Charges**

1437. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider abolishing inpatient charges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43059/21]

1438. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health the work that is ongoing to alleviate the financial cost of inpatient charges on patients with long-term illnesses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43060/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1437 and 1438 together.

The Health Act 1970 (as amended) provides that all persons ordinarily resident in the country are eligible, subject to the statutory in-patient charge, to public in-patient hospital services. The current public hospital statutory in-patient charge is €80 per night, subject to a maximum of €800 in any period of twelve consecutive months. All persons accessing public in-patient services in a public hospital are liable for the statutory public in-patient charge, subject to a number of limited exemptions which include;

- medical card holders;
- people receiving treatment for prescribed infectious diseases - including Coronavirus (Covid-19);
- people who are subject to 'long-stay' charges;
- children referred for treatment from child health clinics and school board examinations;
- people who are eligible for hospital services because of EU Regulations;
- women receiving maternity services;
- children up to 6 weeks of age;

- people with hepatitis C who have a Health Amendment Card;
- people who are part of the Redress Scheme for Women Resident in Certain Institutions.

Patient charges are a key element of the overall funding envelope of the Irish health system and are taken into account when agreeing the Annual Estimates and the subsequent preparation of the annual National Service Plan.

There are no immediate plans to review the list of exemptions to this statutory in-patient charge. However, in line with commitments made in the Department of Health Statement of Strategy and the Sláintecare Implementation Strategy and Action Plan 2021-2023, a review of the eligibility and charges system is planned.

The main objective of Sláintecare is to provide the right care, at the right place, at the right time. Eligibility and some charges have been highlighted as an obstacle to a patient's access to swift high-quality healthcare. The Sláintecare program is committed to addressing any eligibility anomalies through investigating the current eligibility structure. Sláintecare's aim is to shift the system to care for those who are in greatest need first.

*Question No. 1438 answered with Question No. 1437.*

### **Hospital Charges**

1439. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if plans are in place to introduce flexible car parking passes to all public hospitals to help alleviate the financial cost to those with long-term illnesses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43061/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The *Programme for Government* makes a commitment to introduce a cap on the maximum daily charge for patients and visitors at all public hospitals, where possible and to introduce flexible passes in all public hospitals for patients and their families. I am very aware of the financial burden this issue can cause some patients and families. Accordingly, my Department and the HSE are currently examining the issue.

### **Hospital Charges**

1440. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the financial burden faced by those undergoing long-term cancer treatment; if he has taken steps to address the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43062/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Patient charges are an important element of the overall funding of health services in Ireland. These include out-patient charges, Emergency Department charges, daily in-patient charges and long-term stay charges. As is the case for all patients, cancer patients can apply for a range of supports, including medical cards, and are assessed under the criteria applying to all applicants.

In accordance with the provisions of the Health Act 1970 (as amended), eligibility for a medical card is determined by the HSE. Every effort is made by the HSE, within the framework of the legislation, to support applicants in applying for a medical card and, in particular, to take full account of the difficult circumstances in the case of applicants who may be in excess of the income guidelines. It should be noted that, in certain circumstances, the HSE may exercise discretion and grant a medical card even though an applicant exceeds his or her income thresh-

old, where he or she faces difficult financial circumstances, such as extra costs arising from an illness.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

1441. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Health the guidance that has been given for visiting of care homes and other residential homes for the elderly and disabled in the new plan for lifting of restrictions; if there is a plan in place to cover all care homes throughout the country for limits of which family and friends, limits on numbers of visitors at one time and restrictions in place in the event of a Covid-19 case being present in the home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43063/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** 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 came into effect on 19 July 2021 and is available on the HPSC website at [www.hpsc.ie](http://www.hpsc.ie)

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 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.

Notwithstanding the current positive epidemiological outlook and the cautious reopening of society, risks continue to remain and emergent risks such as variants of concern present ongoing challenges and the need for vigilance. Visiting arrangements should continue to take account of general public health advice and the necessary infection prevention and control measures, to reduce the risk of introduction and spread of COVID-19 and protect those living in our communities. This is particularly important in the context of the increasing prevalence of the more transmissible Delta variant. This new variant poses a significant risk, in particular to those who are not yet fully protected though vaccination.

Visitors are reminded of their responsibilities with regard to self-checks for COVID-19 in advance of visits, infection and prevention control and social interaction with all individuals, while in the nursing home.

I have recently communicated with all nursing homes in Ireland, advising them of the current guidelines.

The guidance will be kept under continuing review as new evidence and data emerges

### **Government Communications**

1442. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if he and or his special advisers and or officials use or have used services (details supplied) to communicate in the past 18 months. [43074/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As Minister for Health, I am fully aware of obligations under Freedom of Information legislation and at all times act in accordance with that legislation. Neither Government nor Department of Health business is conducted using the applications mentioned by the Deputy.

### **Health Services**

1443. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of new early intervention teams that have been established since February 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. [43084/21]

1444. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of HSE school age teams currently operating across the country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43085/21]

1445. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the cost to fund a school age team in its entirety, including a clinical psychologist, occupational therapist and speech and language therapist; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43086/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1443 to 1445, inclusive, together.

As the issues raised by the Deputy are service related, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to him directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1444 answered with Question No. 1443.*

*Question No. 1445 answered with Question No. 1443.*

### **Health Services Staff**

1446. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of service providers by type of provider contracted by the HSE to provide rehabilitation services by community health organisation, CHO; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43087/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

1447. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of reducing the drugs payment scheme threshold to €100; the estimated cost of reducing same in increments of €15; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43088/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The cost of reducing the Drug Payment Scheme (DPS) threshold to €100 per month, and thereafter in increments of €15, is as outlined in the following table.

Proposed DPS Threshold	Cost of Reduction*
€100	€11,462,801
€85	€24,114,546
€70	€37,106,525
€55	€50,408,593
€40	€64,065,244
€25	€78,154,780
€10	€92,778,718

\*This data is subject to the following assumptions:

- The source data used for determining costs is the claiming month March 2021, and is annualised to determine cost (i.e., multiplied by 12).

- The costings exclude the increase for any individuals who are below the current threshold level of €114 per month.

- The costing excludes any impact resulting from an aging demographic.

### Dental Services

1448. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the annual spend on the dental treatment services scheme in each of the years 2000 to 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43089/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services

1449. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of community rehabilitation teams currently in operation for each community healthcare organisation, CHO; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43090/21]

1450. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated first year and full-year cost of setting up a new community rehabilitation team; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43091/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1449 and 1450 together.

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

*Question No. 1450 answered with Question No. 1449.*

### **Ambulance Service**

1451. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the reason the National Ambulance Service does not recognise intermediate care operatives as ambulance personnel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43092/21]

1452. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the reason the National Ambulance Service is asking intermediate care operatives to work on emergency ambulances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43093/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1451 and 1452 together.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible. *Question No. 1452 answered with Question No. 1451.*

### **Ambulance Service**

1453. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the staffing levels of the National Ambulance Service by CHO; the current number of wholetime equivalent posts by occupation currently working; the recommended and budgeted number; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43094/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Vaccination Programme**

1454. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if advice will be provided in relation to a matter raised in correspondence regarding vaccination (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43095/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Dental Services**

1455. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the units by community healthcare organisation, CHO, or any smaller unit in which HSE dental services have been limited to emergency provision only for children and or adults for each month of 2020 and to date in 2021, as has occurred in County Kildare and west County Wicklow; if any other units are considering the confinement of services; the reason in each case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43096/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Dental Services**

1456. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health when routine and elective treatments including school dental checks and dental appointments for children and adults will resume in Kildare and west Wicklow; if any of these services have been suspended in any other CHO; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43097/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

1457. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if advice will be provided regarding a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43098/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Staff**

1458. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of consultants at Beaumont Hospital performing full removal of transobturator mesh implants; the number of surgeries performed in the past month; the outcomes of these surgeries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43099/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Vaccination Programme**

1459. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if there are or will be any special procedures including supervision by an immunologist of persons who are vaccine candidates but are likely to suffer from anaphylaxis or another reaction; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43100/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

1460. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of providing additional dedicated children's beds for psychiatric care to stop the practice of using beds in adult psychiatric services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43101/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## **Health Services**

1461. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of HSE early intervention teams presently in operation across the State; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43102/21]

1462. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of HSE school age teams in operation across the State; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43103/21]

1463. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of a new HSE school age team by individual category. [43104/21]

1464. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the net change in the number of and wholetime equivalent staffing of early intervention teams since February 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43105/21]

1465. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of a new early intervention team by individual category. [43106/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I propose to take Question Nos. 1461 to 1465, inclusive, together.

As the issues raised by the deputy are service related, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to him directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1462 answered with Question No. 1461.*

*Question No. 1463 answered with Question No. 1461.*

*Question No. 1464 answered with Question No. 1461.*

*Question No. 1465 answered with Question No. 1461*

## **Vaccination Programme**

1466. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his position in relation to the recent HSE commitment to recruit medical and nursing students as vaccinators; if these positions will be reimbursed; if the HSE can outline the eligibility criteria; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43107/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## **Health Services**

1467. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health when x-ray services will be reinstated in University Hospital Waterford; the number of persons awaiting an urgent general practitioner referral x-ray in the Hospital; the waiting time for such an x-ray; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43108/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## **Disease Management**

1468. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the steps being taken regarding the diagnosis and subsequent treatment of Lyme disease and to ensure that persons suffering with Lyme disease or chronic Lyme disease are being properly supported; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43109/21]

1495. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the steps being taken regarding the diagnosis and subsequent treatment of Lyme disease and to ensure that persons suffering with Lyme disease or chronic Lyme disease are being properly supported; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43137/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1468 and 1495 together.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## **Health Services Staff**

1469. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of Consultant Applications Advisory Committee regularised approved consultant posts; the number of posts registered on the Doctors Integrated Management E-System as vacant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43110/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly on the data requested, as soon as possible.

## **Vaccination Programme**

1470. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the supports and safeguards that have been provided for vaccinators who do not have professional indemnity insurance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43112/21]

1493. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the supports and safeguards that have been provided for vaccinators that do not have a professional indemnity insurance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43135/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1470 and 1493 together.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## **Vaccination Programme**

1471. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the details in relation to insurance for vaccinators; if nurses who have been recruited as vaccinators and are former members of the union will be covered by the union's professional scheme; and if he will make

a statement on the matter. [43113/21]

1494. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the details in relation to insurance for vaccinators; if nurses who have been recruited as vaccinators and are former members of their union will be covered by the professional scheme of their union; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43136/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1471 and 1494 together.

It is beyond the remit of the department to answer questions about independent third-party bodies and T&Cs of their own schemes (eg: nursing unions).

### **Health Services**

1472. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if he and the HSE have considered plans submitted by a society (details supplied) relating to a dedicated unit to treat and rehabilitate patients with intestinal failure; if he has made a decision on the proposal for such a unit at a location such as St. James's Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43114/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Staff**

1473. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of assistant psychologists that are currently working in a voluntary capacity within the HSE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43115/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Staff**

1474. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his views on the recruitment of assistant psychologists in an unpaid capacity; if the review has been carried out; if the results of the review will be made available to the public; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43116/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible

### **Health Services**

1475. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his plans to expand the current national pilot assistant psychology programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43117/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The role of Assistant Psychologist supports the provision of psychology services in primary care settings, enabling delivery of early and cost-effective interventions for children and adolescents, and is key to delivering a “stepped care” model in which service users receive the level of required support and/or intervention appropriate to their assessed need.

The establishment of 114 paid Assistant Psychologist posts within HSE Psychology Services on a pilot basis was a key action in the HSE’s National Service Plan for 2016, with the posts coming on-stream in a phased basis during 2017, and funding of €3.4m being provided for implementation of this important initiative.

The employment of Assistant Psychologists in HSE Primary Care Psychology services is a time-limited pilot project and is being independently evaluated. All Assistant Psychologist posts were due to complete their contracts by the end of July 2020 when the evaluation was originally due to be finalised. However, due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was necessary for this evaluation process to be paused during 2020 before being extended to the end of September 2021.

The Assistant Psychology programme has subsequently been extended again to the end of December 2021 to allow the programme to continue to deliver for clients and to provide some degree of certainty to those currently in post. A decision on the long-term future of the grade will be made following submission and consideration of the final evaluation report.

### Health Services

1476. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of acute inpatient beds in the health service; the number of beds in wards; the number of beds in single room isolation; the estimated cost to replace 10% of beds in wards with single isolation; if he has plans or targets to replace beds over a fixed time period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43118/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services

1477. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the average revenue cost of a community bed by type of community bed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43119/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Dental Services

1478. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of dentists that have withdrawn from the dental service scheme in the period 31 May 2020 to 31 May 2021, by county and by CHO area in tabular form; the number of dentists that remain on the scheme by county and by CHO; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43120/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Staff**

1479. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated additional cost of providing at least one advanced nurse practitioner in each heart failure service unit. [43121/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The skill mix for the model of care in each heart failure unit including advanced nurse practitioners and associated cost is a matter for the Health Service Executive (HSE).

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

### **Health Services Staff**

1480. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the cost of ten wholetime equivalent lactation consultants. [43122/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The cost of ten wholetime equivalent Lactation Consultants is €659,608

On 11 May, funding of €1.58m was announced to provide the additional 24 Lactation Consultants across hospital and community settings, that are required to implement the National Breastfeeding Action Plan and ensure timely skilled assistance for mothers who wish to breast-feed. It will also support enhanced training, skills and knowledge to frontline staff.

### **Health Services Staff**

1481. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of 50 new nursing posts. [43123/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Staff**

1482. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of non-training NCHD posts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43124/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Service Executive**

1483. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of HSE patients who have been facilitated for treatment in the United States for full or partial removal of transobturator mesh implants; if a patient could access public funding for such treatment in the US; if so, the person or body that authorises same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43125/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I understand that complications from a mesh implant are very distressing and painful for those women involved. Women's health is a priority for this Government, as outlined in the programme for Government and since the emergence of this matter, the ongoing priority focus for the Department and the HSE has been to meet the care needs of women experiencing mesh complications. Women affected by mesh continue to be strongly encouraged to engage with the relevant HSE contact points and the associated care pathways, to ensure that their service needs can be identified and provided for.

Considerable work has been done and continues to progress in Ireland in relation to the safe use of mesh implants and ensuring that all women who develop mesh-related complications receive high quality, multidisciplinary and patient-centred care is a priority.

Multidisciplinary specialist services are available for women suffering from mesh complications through a National Specialist Centre which has been developed over two sites at Cork University Maternity Hospital (CUMH) and the National Maternity Hospital (NMH) Dublin and these have received specific funding from the HSE for the provision of these services. Both centres currently treat women suffering with post-mesh complications and have been accepting referrals from the national pathway since it was set up in November 2018.

The HSE has created a dedicated web page about vaginal mesh implants, including contact information regarding the pathways for women suffering complications. 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/](http://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/acute-hospitals-division/woman-infants/vaginal-mesh-implants/).

As this Parliamentary Question also relates to a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Staff**

1484. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the cost to restore pay equality for consultants on type B contracts; the additional cost of any back pay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43126/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service related matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Vaccination Programme**

1485. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated additional cost of a 100% uptake each year of the HPV vaccine. [43127/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

**Health Services Staff**

1486. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of 50 new healthcare assistant posts. [43128/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

**Health Services**

1487. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if he will address the immediate funding need for dementia-specific day care services provided by a society (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43129/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is a matter for the Health Service Executive to identify the need for dementia-specific day care services and to make appropriate service arrangements for the delivery of such services to meet identified needs. In this context, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly on the question of the immediate funding need for dementia-specific day care services.

More broadly, the provision of funding to respond to the ongoing need for dementia-specific day care services is a matter for consideration in the forthcoming Estimates process.

**Vaccination Programme**

1488. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated additional cost for the school immunisation programme if uptake was to be 100% each year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43130/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

**Vaccination Programme**

1489. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated additional cost for the school immunisation programme if those who did not get the HPV vaccine in their year of eligibility were to receive it during a subsequent school year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43131/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

**Covid-19 Pandemic**

1490. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if he has engaged with the Minister for Education, the HSE and higher education institutes to ensure that students on clinical placements in hospitals who opt not to be vaccinated can complete their placements without failing or repeating the previous academic year; if allowing students to have regular Covid-19

testing privately will be considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43132/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy in respect of this operational matter, and the measures in place in these circumstances.

### Health Services Staff

1491. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number and types of staff required to safely staff an adult critical care bed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43133/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The HSE National Clinical Programme for Critical Care has calculated that there is a requirement of 5.6 nursing WTEs per ICU bed to provide direct 1:1 nursing care on a 24/7 basis. Alongside this, other specific requirements including ACCESS nurses, clinical educators and clinical nurse managers which will vary depending on unit size and skill mix. In relation to medical staffing, the National Clinical Programme has adopted the Critical Care Minimum Service Requirements definition provided by the JFICMI National Standards. I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy in relation to further detail on staffing requirements.

The Deputy may wish to note that a Strategic Plan for Critical Care was noted by Government in December 2020. This aims to increase critical care capacity to 446 beds over time. The Plan recognises workforce planning and education as key to capacity expansion, and this is reflected in the funding provided this year to commence the implementation of the Strategic Plan.

### Medical Research and Training

1492. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost to increase the general practitioner trainee intake to 250; the number of places provided for each of the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43134/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1493 answered with Question No. 1470.*

*Question No. 1494 answered with Question No. 1471.*

*Question No. 1495 answered with Question No. 1468.*

### Hospital Facilities

1496. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the occupancy rates of both inpatient acute and ICU beds for each hospital group on 1 July 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43138/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

1497. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of establishing a permanent Covid-19 testing and tracing unit with the capacity to manage 500 cases a day; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43139/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The cost of establishing a stand alone testing and tracing facility of the type described is estimated to be €18.6 million per annum.

However, caution should be used in interpreting this estimate as it should be seen within the context of providing a national testing and tracing programme that has regard to regional demand and variation in the scale of response. This estimate also assumes a full year testing and tracing programme of the type that currently exists and does not take in to account any changes which might arise in adapting the programme to expected changing circumstances (such as, for example, as might be expected over the course of the evolving and changing pandemic and considerations such as the broader management of other infectious diseases.) The estimate assumes a consistent rate of testing over the full year period although this is unlikely (and depends on future epidemiological situation, transmissibility of the dominant variant, the nature and location of infections, the effectiveness of vaccines in reducing transmission, public health guidance and measures in place etc). The estimate also assumes that variable costs are consistent across the period although this is also unlikely (e.g. staffing, transport, rent and fit-out, procurement costs etc). Fixed costs are assumed to be similar to present and no estimate of any changes is included and, again, it is likely that maintenance and location of testing centres will evolve over the coming year.

In keeping with the evolving nature of the pandemic, the Deputy may also wish to note the transitional approach to testing and tracing highlighted in the Government's recently published plan for the next phase of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, "COVID-19: Reframing the challenge, Continuing our recovery and reconnecting".

### **Hospital Facilities**

1498. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the all-in revenue cost of an acute inpatient bed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43140/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Facilities**

1499. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the total cost of delivering the new 26 critical care beds in the Mater Misericordiae University Hospital, Tallaght University Hospital and University Hospital Limerick; the cost per stage and across cost types for each project; the length of time each project will take to fully complete for each stage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43141/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The cost of a critical care bed has several determining factors. The HSE has advised that a new critical care bed will typically cost between €1m and €1.5m, depending on a variety of factors, including design, construction, equipping and all other associated capital costs. The HSE has advised that the average annual cost of running a critical care bed is estimated to be €747k, based on 2018 data. However, it

should be noted that this figure includes costs for both ICU and HDU beds, with the ICU beds the more expensive of the two.

A Strategic Plan for Critical Care was noted by Government in December 2020. This Plan aims to increase capacity from a baseline of 255 to 446 over time, fully addressing the recommendations of the Health Service Capacity Review. As the first phase of implementation, funding of €52m was provided in 2021 to allow for the permanent retention of the 40 beds temporarily funded in 2020, plus an additional 26 beds as referenced by the Deputy. Of these, the HSE has advised that the six beds in UHL were opened in the first half of this year, with the beds at the Mater and Tallaght hospitals due to open in Q42021/Q12022 on completion of capital works. I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy in regard to the specific detail requested on these projects.

*Question No. 1500 answered with Question No. 1315.*

### **Hospital Facilities**

1501. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of acute inpatient beds funded in budget 2021 that have been delivered and that are expected to be delivered by year end. [43143/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Department of Health is working with the HSE to increase acute capacity in hospitals throughout the country. The Government allocated €236 million revenue and €40 million capital expenditure as part of Budget 2021 to fund 1,146 additional acute beds on a permanent basis by the end of 2021 (excluding critical care beds).

As of 6 May, the HSE has reported that 834 of these beds had opened. This represents a significant step towards achieving the recommendations in the 2018 Health Service Capacity Review.

With regard to the number of beds that have opened since, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Staff**

1502. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of vacancies that currently exist in CHO5 across psychiatry, psychology, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, counselling and psychotherapy and mental health nursing by job title in tabular form; the number of positions across these disciplines that are currently fulfilled by locum or agency staff; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43144/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Service Executive**

1503. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the way consultancy firms utilised by the HSE strategy and planning will be managed in the future; the steps that are currently being undertaken by his Department to ensure that HSE staff are utilised in place of

consultancy firms moving forward; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43145/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the matters raised relate to the HSE's strategy and planning, I have forwarded your correspondence to the HSE for direct reply as they would be best placed to respond.

As you may be aware, the HSE infrastructure was recently subject to a serious cyber attack which has impacted email and other communication systems. Please note that, until such time as the HSE systems have been fully restored, and backlogs addressed there may be delays in responding to your query.

### **Health Services Staff**

1504. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the cost to restore pay equality for consultants on type C contracts; the additional cost of any back pay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43146/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service related matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

1505. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of completing the repatriation of CervicalCheck screening services and diagnostics into a single public laboratory; the number of staff which need to be hired; the cost for same; the capital cost, if any; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43147/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Construction of the National Cervical Screening Laboratory (NCSL) commenced on-site at the Coombe Women and Infants University Hospital (CWIUH) in early January 2021 and significant progress is being made.

Capital costs for the design, build, and fit-out of the NCSL:

- There are estimated capital costs of approximately €15 million for the design, construction and general fit-out of the new laboratory.

- The equipment fit-out is estimated to be approximately €5 million.

- A comprehensive workforce plan has been developed, which allows for 23.2 FTE (full-time equivalent staff). The full year workforce costs are estimated to be approximately €2 million.

Allowances have been made for this within the HSE capital and estimate plan for 2021/2022.

The opening of the new NCSL at the CWIUH will build capacity and resilience into the public element of the laboratory services required for the national cervical screening programme in Ireland. The NCSL, acting as the principal provider of laboratory screening services, will enable the National Screening Service to reduce its dependency on third party providers to meet the needs of CervicalCheck - the national cervical screening programme. The NCSL will also serve as the national base for training, education and research purposes as relevant to the national cervical screening programme.

### Health Services Staff

1506. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated additional cost of providing four whole-time-equivalent heart failure clinical nurse specialists per 150,000 persons; the estimated number of additional heart failure clinical nurse specialists this would require; the number of vacancies in this area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43148/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services Staff

1507. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of 50 new midwife posts. [43149/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Medical Research and Training

1508. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of training NCHD posts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43150/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Medical Internships

1509. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of providing an additional 180 expand medical intern training places in 2022; the requirements for such an expansion in terms of supervising posts and so on; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43151/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services

1510. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated additional cost of providing BNP blood testing and echocardiography at primary care level; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43152/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Some €25m was allocated to the GP Access to Diagnostics Initiative in 2021. This initiative allows GPs to refer patients directly to private providers in order to access diagnostic radiology services of various modalities, in a

community-based setting. The potential to further enhance this initiative to provide additional access for GPs to further diagnostics including NTproBNP blood testing and Echocardiogram has been identified, with work ongoing.

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

### **Health Services Staff**

1511. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated additional cost of providing a dedicated cardiac physiologist in each heart failure unit. [43153/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Staff**

1512. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of an additional chronic disease management team; the staffing composition of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43154/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Community Care**

1513. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of increasing community paramedicine resources by 5%; the staffing composition of current community paramedicine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43155/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Staff**

1514. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of making heart failure community integration teams available nationally and standardising their roles across all CHO areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43156/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Budget 2019 provided €20 million for the establishment of a new ring-fenced Sláintecare Integration Fund to test and scale how services can best be delivered. The Integration Fund looked for initiatives that support the delivery of integrated care and the shift to community care in new and innovative ways, helping to reduce and prevent hospital visits. This will support us in meeting our ultimate goal of reducing waiting lists and reducing waiting times.

The Fund supported a number of projects testing integrated care pathways for heart failure patients. Details of these projects are set out below.

Number	Project Name
129 A	Donegal Heart Failure Integrated Care Service
129 B	Sligo/Leitrim/W. Cavan/Sth. Donegal /Roscommon Heart Failure Integrated Care Service
165	Integrated Ambulatory Care Heart Failure Project - Improving quality of life for patients with Heart Failure
237	Heart Failure Virtual Consultation Service with Clinical Nurse Specialist Support in the Community
248	Community based Integrated Diagnostic and Care Initiative - Reduction in referral and follow-up waiting times for Heart Failure Patients
377	Heart Failure Service Integrated Care Project - Reduced Hospital Length of Stay through Integrated Heart Failure Service
416	Integrated Heart Failure Management Programme-Improving patient outcomes and health service efficiency by comprehensive and innovative integration of care across the continuum of healthcare settings - Improving patient outcomes through integrated care for heart failure
430	Cardiology Advance Nurse Practitioner (ANP) Heart Failure - Half day reduction in length of hospital stay thanks to Advance Nursing Practitioner in Cardiology
469	Galway University Hospitals Community Cardiac Diagnostics - Reduced Waiting Times for Cardiac Diagnostic

These projects were evaluated and were found to have successfully met their targets and objectives. They have been mainstreamed and are now being funded under the Enhanced Community Care programme under NSP 2021 at a cost of €2.5 million.

Issues of an operational nature under the remit of the HSE also arise in this PQ and I have referred it to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy.

### Health Services Staff

1515. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of staff brought on in the first half of 2021 and to be brought on in the second half of 2021 and in 2022 for community healthcare networks; the number of staff who will be reassigned from within the HSE in each of those periods; the staffing composition across grade and occupation in wholetime equivalent terms by community health network; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43157/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 1516 answered with Question No. 1038.*

*Question No. 1517 answered with Question No. 1050.*

### Dental Services

1518. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if orthodontic appointments will be expedited for persons (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43180/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Agriculture Industry

1519. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the interim solutions being considered to support farmers impacted by EU Directive 2019/904 prohibiting products in Ireland used to cover maize grown; the interactions he has had with organisations, farmers and the EU; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41446/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** As outlined to the Deputy in my reply of 15th July, the provisions of Council Directive 2019/904 were signed by the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Communications in SI 326 of 2021 on 2nd July. The provisions of these Regulations prohibit the marketing of single use plastics including films of the type used to cover sown maize.

The legislation in question relates specifically to the marketing of single use plastics from 3rd July 2021. Maize growers may use existing stocks of maize plastic present on their farms that were purchased prior to the commencement of this legislation.

I understand that the sector continues in its efforts to develop alternative products for use in the sowing of maize that will be compliant with these new Regulations.

I have recently engaged with the industry and both I, and the Department, are available to continue to engage with the sector along with our counterparts in the Department of the Environment, Climate Change and Communications.

In parallel, in terms of support for the sector, my 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 is currently available on the Irish market for growers.

### Fisheries Protection

1520. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the budget allocation for Sea Fisheries Protection Authority for each of the years 2019, 2020 and 2021, in tabular form. [41457/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Sea Fisheries Protection Authority annual exchequer budgetary details is as follows;

Year	€Estimated	€ Outturn/Spend
2019	13,795,000	13,005,000
2020	17,361,000	13,197,000
2021	24,810,000	

The budget allocation provided to the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) enables the SFPA to continue to meet its National and EU obligations as Ireland's competent Authority for enforcement of Sea Fisheries and seafood safety law and to address challenges arising from Brexit.

The SFPA budget has increased significantly in the 2019-2021 period due to the allocation of additional staff, staffing levels have increased from 104 in 2017 to 158 in August 2021. The expenditure in 2020 was impacted by delays in recruitment of additional staff arising mainly from COVID restrictions.

The 2021 budget also includes a provision of €5.808 under EU funded programmes for IT

and other developments which were previously provided for in the general Department's budget.

### **Fishery Harbour Centres**

1521. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the fishery harbours under the remit of his Department he has visited to date in 2021; and the purpose of each visit. [41458/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Department owns, operates and maintains six designated State-owned Fishery Harbour Centres, located at Castletownbere, Dingle, Dunmore East, Howth, Killybegs and Ros An Mhíl under statute.

I have had ongoing engagement with stakeholders in the Seafood Sector since I took office last year. Unfortunately, due COVID-19 restrictions I haven't been able to engage with people on the pierside. In order to interact directly with members of coastal communities, during the month of May 2021, I held a series of virtual Townhall meetings with coastal communities around Ireland. These virtual meetings allowed me to hear directly from those impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit and to hear their ideas about the future of their communities.

At these meetings, I gave an overview of the key issues that have faced the Fishing Industry since I took office, namely Brexit and COVID-19. I noted that the industry had worked with their counterparts in other Member States to assist in the development of a strong Irish position for EU negotiations. I also noted the additional burden on Ireland in respect of the transfer of quotas under the TCA which I am working to address.

I also took the opportunity to acknowledge the work of the seafood sector throughout the disruptions caused by COVID-19. I made reference to the Seafood Sector Taskforce which will advise on how best to support the sector. The establishment of this Task Force reflects the recognition by Government of the challenges facing the sector and the commitment to support the sector.

The contributions of the various participants at these virtual meetings were many and varied and I have taken note of, and been advised by them.

Subsequently in July, I personally visited Howth, Killybegs, Castletownbere and Dunmore East Fishery Harbour Centres to meet directly with fishers, processors, fishing organisations and other stakeholders and listen first hand to the issues impacting on them. I also took the opportunity of my visits to the Fishery Harbour Centres, to visit key Local Authority owned piers with a large fishing tradition, such as Kilmore Quay and Union Hall, for the same purposes.

I have plans to visit two other Fishery Harbour Centres, namely, Dingle and Ros An Mhíl Fishery Harbour Centres, however, this will hopefully be in the Autumn but no date has been set at this time for these visits.

### **Departmental Staff**

1522. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the current policy regarding the employment of persons with disabilities in his Department and in each State and semi-State body under the aegis of his Department; the disability quota of his Department at present; if there is an active campaign to increase the disability workforce from

the current target of 3% to a minimum of 6% by 2024; if this quota has now been exceeded; if so, the details of same; if there has been an advertised competition in relation to the quota; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41587/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** In accordance with Section 47 of the Disability Act 2005, all public service bodies are obliged “*in so far as practicable*” to take all reasonable measures to promote and support the employment of persons with disabilities.

In compliance with Section 47(4) of the Disability Act, my Department surveys all employees annually to establish the number of employees who have a disability.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has exceeded the 3% minimum target for persons with disabilities in each of the last ten years, with the figure for 2020 at 3.8%. It should be noted that disclosure by individuals of their disability status is voluntary, as is the disclosure of the nature of any disability disclosed.

The Department has a Disability Liaison Officer who fosters awareness of equality and disability issues among staff and provides support, advice and guidance to staff and managers in ensuring staff with a disability have equal opportunities throughout their career in my Department. The Disability Liaison Officer also facilitates reasonable accommodation as appropriate for employees with disabilities.

The Department is a long time supporter of providing employment opportunities for persons with disabilities and has participated for many years in the Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) Programme. This programme provides a six month paid and mentored work placement for graduates with a disability. In the last few years, the Department has increased the number of placements it has made available under the WAM programme. Many former participants of the programme have gone on to secure permanent employment in the Civil Service.

The Department has participated in the Job Shadow Initiative on a continuous basis since 2009. Job Shadow Day is a national project, bringing people with disabilities and local employers together for one day to promote equal employment opportunities

In accordance with the Department’s Diversity, Equality and Inclusion policy, the Department explores initiatives with a view to increasing workplace opportunities for persons with disabilities. One very successful initiative has been collaboration with the Oireachtas on the Oireachtas Work Learning programme (OWL), a learning, development and socialisation programme for young adults with an intellectual disability. The programme aims to provide a real and applied learning experience to the participants in a safe and secure work environment, to support them in developing the skills which will lead them to access paid employment in the open labour market.

The Department will be happy to participate in any actions required to increase the disability workforce either through competitions run by its recruitment partners - the Public Appointments Service - or through direct recruitment.

The question of the employment of persons with disabilities and disability initiatives in the State Bodies under the aegis of the Department is a matter for the Agencies themselves. This information has been requested from the State Bodies in question and the information will be forwarded to the Deputy directly.

1523. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when the landing facility at Cromane, County Kerry will be delivered as previously promised through the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund 2014-2020. [41676/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Department owns, operates and maintains six designated State-owned Fishery Harbour Centres, located at Castletownbere, Dingle, Dunmore East, Howth, Killybegs and Ros An Mhíl under statute. In addition, the Department also has responsibility for the upkeep and maintenance of North Harbour at Cape Clear, as well as the maintenance of a small number of specific piers, lights and beacons throughout Ireland, in accordance with the Marine Works (Ireland) Act 1902, and piers, lights and beacons constructed under the auspices of the Congested Districts Board.

Responsibility for the development, and maintenance of Local Authority owned piers, harbours and slipways rests with each Local Authority in the first instance, and the parent Department, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, thereafter.

However, as part of its annual Fishery Harbour and Coastal Infrastructure Development Programme, the Department has, in previous years, provided funding to assist coastal Local Authorities in carrying out small scale projects for the development and repair of piers, harbours and slipways in their ownership.

The Local Authority element of our capital programme co-funds up to 75% of the total cost of approved projects (subject to a maximum overall project cost of €200,000) with the Local Authority providing the balance.

Between the years 2010 to 2020, over €1.9 million in funding has been granted under this programme to Kerry County Council with approximately 25 harbours in the County benefitting, over that period.

Under this year's programme, funding of €4.2m has been approved to assist coastal Local Authorities undertake and complete 79 development and repair projects on harbours and slipways owned by them. The package provides funding for maintenance and repair works in addition to supporting the ongoing development and enhancement of harbour facilities, including some marine leisure developments.

Kerry County Council has secured funding of €213.75k under this year's programme, to undertake three projects in total.

In late 2019 the Department agreed to make officials available to participate in a working group on the possible development of Cromane Pier. This group was to have been organised and convened by Kerry County Council, to date, this group has not met, that said the Department's commitment to participate remains.

No application for funding was received under this year's programme in relation to Cromane.

Should any application be made for funding by Kerry County Council under any future programme in relation to actual capital works at Cromane, it will be given due consideration, taking into account the terms and conditions of the scheme, the priority attached to the project by the Council, available Exchequer funding and overall national priorities.

**Departmental Staff**

1524. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which staff shortages at district veterinary offices have been recognised with particular reference to Kildare; if he plans to augment staffing levels to cater for an increased workload; if so, when such an improvement can be expected; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41703/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is committed to ensuring that a skilled and motivated workforce is in place to meet its business needs and utilises workforce planning to identify and address these requirements for all our locations.

Recruitment is currently under way in the Department, and vacancies continue to be advertised by either the Public Appointments Service (PAS) or by my Department's Human Resources Division. I am acutely conscious of the need for farmers and members of the public to avail of prompt and efficient services and all critical staffing vacancies are filled as soon as possible.

The Department's office in Kildare currently has a total of four vacancies, and work is actively ongoing to fill these posts, and all vacancies in Local Offices around the country.

### **Forestry Sector**

1525. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which the administrative difficulties associated with the issue of tree felling licenses has been fully resolved to the satisfaction of stakeholders in the industry; if building timber supplies have been enhanced in line with requirements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41704/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Along with Minister of State Pippa Hackett, who has overall responsibility for the sector, I fully recognise the impact the current forestry licencing delays are having on the sector. I am in regular and intensive consultation with all stakeholders, and it is my immediate priority to resolve the issues which have led to this backlog and to issue licences in the volume needed for this important sector to continue to contribute to our rural economy.

The delays that have arisen were caused by changes to the licensing system which means that a significant number of cases now need ecological input to comply with environmental requirements. To find solutions towards resolving these issues, as well as focusing on woodland creation, Project Woodland was initiated early in 2021.

It comprises four working groups, each with an independent chair and with members drawn from forestry and eNGO stakeholders on the Forestry Policy Group. The Project Board, chaired by Secretary General of my Department, published its first Interim Report in July and the Project Manager has published the Project Charter which details project management oversight.

As part of Project Woodland, a tender has recently issued to source legal and environmental expertise to carry out an in-depth review of the forestry licensing system. It will review the existing statutory framework for the licencing of forestry activities in relation to environmental and public participation obligations in order that practical advice can be provided to the Department on how to work more efficiently within the existing legal framework.

The business systems analysis currently being undertaken by an independent systems analyst will interact with and run parallel with the regulatory review, so that best possible system improvements are delivered.

In June this year, the Department issued 415 forestry licences. This output was interrupted in July and August by the introduction of a new requirement for public participation under SI 293/2021, signed on 25th June by the Minister for Housing Local Government and Heritage and which applies to all similar planning issues. However last week licences returned to expected levels with 110 new licences issued of which 92 were felling licences, with 41 private, and we expect this increased output to continue through to the end of the year.

In terms of supply to the building industry, Coillte who account for around 75% of total sawlog to sawmills, have been fully licensed for 2021. We are still working through the backlog of private felling licences, and with a dedicated team in place and the system improvements introduced, we expect recent private felling licence output to be maintained.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate my commitment to supporting the forest sector and to building on the recent progress, so that a continual improvement in delivery is achieved.

### **Animal Diseases**

1526. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which ongoing efforts continue to be made to identify the sources of bovine TB in certain areas throughout the country; if particular steps have been taken to address issues arising from areas showing the highest level of reported outbreaks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41705/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** In areas that show a high increase in TB levels the regional veterinary office implement a High Impact TB Control Plan and work with farmers and stakeholders to reduce levels of TB in those areas. These control plans involve increased focus being brought to bear on the affected areas with increased levels of testing and other control measures being implemented. The increased co-operation and collaboration with local farmers and other stakeholders in these areas works to reduce the level of disease in these areas as has been the case recently in the Cavan/Monaghan and Clare areas.

Earlier this year I launched a new Bovine TB Eradication Strategy 2021-2030 and one of the key strategic actions included in the strategy is the further development of these plans in consultation with the Implementation Working Group of the TB Stakeholder Forum.

### **Animal Diseases**

1527. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the total number of bovine TB outbreaks by county in each of the past ten-years to date; the action or research taken with a view to identifying the causes of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41706/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I start off by saying that I am acutely aware of the emotional and financial strain put on farm families by an outbreak of TB and I am committed to driving down TB rates across the country.

The table below details the number of herds experiencing a new restriction, due to bovine TB, since 1st January each year, by county over the past 10 years to date and the number of reactors related to these restrictions.

While TB disease is low relative to historical levels, the number of new restrictions and

reactor numbers have been gradually increasing since 2016. Although the pace of deterioration accelerated in 2020, there are encouraging signs as the current 12-month rolling herd incidence at 29th August 2021 is 4.16% compared to 4.22% on 30th August 2020. The overall number of new herds restricted at 29th August 2021 is 2,879 compared to 3,033 on 30th August 2020 while the overall number of reactors at 29th August 2021 is 13,092 compared to 14,431 on 30th August 2020. If downward momentum can be maintained, it can give a sense of progress achieved by the renewed TB Strategy launched in January 2021.

The reasons for increase in disease over the last number of years are multifactorial and often relate to a combination of national and local factors.

The expansion of the dairy herd since 2015 has played a role in this, since dairy herds, larger herds, farm fragmentation and herds which introduce more cattle are all more at risk of TB breakdowns. Wildlife is also a factor.

The causes for the outbreaks of TB cases across the country within each county are various and require a range of actions to address the problem.

Within each county the TB programme focuses on wildlife, how disease is distributed in the area, contiguous programmes, gamma interferon testing, cleansing and disinfection, testing compliance and frequency and isolation of reactors.

Each TB outbreak is investigated by a veterinary inspector to identify the source of infection. In the case of every outbreak involving two or more standard reactors, there is a veterinary visit to advise the herdowner on how to eliminate infection and necessary measures to assist in reducing the risk of recurrence.

[number of herds experiencing a new restriction, due to bovine TB](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09_pq152709092021_en.xlsx)

### **Animal Diseases**

1528. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which animals or birds have been identified as potential carriers of bovine TB by county in each of the past five-years to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41707/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The information is being collated and will be returned to the Deputy within two weeks

### **Animal Diseases**

1529. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the results of any tests carried out on animals or birds arising from incidents of bovine TB by county over the past five-years to date; the actions taken or pending arising therefrom; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41708/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The information is being collated and will be returned to the Deputy within two weeks

## Veterinary Services

1530. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which it is expected to make basic veterinary products available to the farming community through licenced providers as heretofore with particular reference to parasitic controls; if the EU in general has adopted a policy in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41709/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** In line with findings from a 2019 Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA) Expert Task Force Report, antiparasitic veterinary medicines no longer meet exemption criteria in EU law which permits them to be supplied without a veterinary prescription. Therefore, from 28th January 2022 antiparasitic veterinary medicines will require a veterinary prescriptions before they can be supplied.

All current suppliers of antiparasitic veterinary medicines will continue to be legally permitted to supply these medicines post January 2022. The Department is actively working with all stakeholders to sustain a competitive market for the supply of these products. The ambition is to ensure Irish farmers are empowered to purchase medicines from their supplier of choice. Initiatives such as the development of a National Veterinary Prescribing System (NVPS) will help deliver on this ambition. The NVPS will result in a prescription being made available to a farmer by choice of email, text or in paper. Farmers can then engage with Licensed Merchants, veterinary pharmacists or their veterinary practitioner in getting their prescription dispensed.

## Animal Welfare

1531. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he plans to introduce new legislation to protect animals from cruelty; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41715/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Programme for Government places a positive emphasis on animal welfare and specifically commits to the continued robust enforcement of the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013.

This Act provides a modern framework for regulating and applying standards in the area of animal health and welfare and replaced a number of enactments dating back over a century. The Act was passed, after a lengthy and constructive debate in both Houses of the Oireachtas and came into operation on 6 March 2014.

I am committed to the continued application of the Act which is considered fully fit for purpose.

Neglect of or causing unnecessary suffering to animals is not acceptable in our society. My Department continues to enforce the law in this important area along with An Garda Síochána, the Customs service, the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Dublin Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

The Department also provides support to animal welfare organisations to assist in rescuing and supporting the welfare of animals and to Local Authorities in supporting horse projects in urban areas. 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.

It remains my policy that animal welfare standards are vigorously applied in a fair and

even-handed manner. Those responsible for causing unnecessary suffering to animals or being negligent regarding animal welfare will continue to be held to account and sanctions applied up to and including prosecution through the Courts as and when necessary.

The Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 provides for (a) summary offences tried before the district court to a maximum of a €5,000 fine or six months imprisonment (b) offences that may be tried on indictment before the circuit court may be fined up to €250,000 and/or imprisonment for a period of up to five years.

In addition, the courts may prohibit a person from keeping animals for a period which may include his/her lifetime.

The Department is assessing the penalties available under the Act in accordance with the commitment in the current Programme for Government.

### **Departmental Bodies**

1532. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of research staff employed at the Foras na Mara Marine Institute in Newport in each year since 2006; the total number of full-time permanent research staff employed at the Foras na Mara Marine Institute in Newport each year since 2006, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41833/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The information requested with respect to the staffing levels assigned to the Marine Institute's facilities at Newport is an operational matter for the Marine Institute. I have accordingly referred the Deputy's queries to the Marine Institute for attention and direct reply.

### **Departmental Bodies**

1533. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount of public funding for the Foras na Mara Marine Institute in Newport in each year since 2006, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41834/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The information requested with respect to the funding allocation specifically for the Newport facilities is an operational matter for the Marine Institute. I have accordingly referred the Deputy's query to the Marine Institute for attention and direct reply.

### **Food Industry**

1534. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the meetings held by his Departmental officials from assistant principal level upwards with representatives of the food industry in relation to the issue of infant nutrition in Ireland from 2016 to date, including the issue of infant formula; the dates, attendees and matters that were discussed at each meeting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41841/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** In 2020, Ireland exported dairy products to approximately 143 countries with a value exceeding €5.1 billion. Infant Formula was our third most valuable dairy export amounting to €896 mil-

lion in 2020. Ireland, as a producer of high quality sustainable dairy products, is an important source of infant and follow-on formula internationally.

The Department supervises the production of infant and follow-on formula in Ireland through a robust controls systems ensuring Infant and follow-on formula is produced to the highest standards in accordance with all relevant governing regulations. In addition to inspections and audits carried out by Department's inspectorate, officials from the Department meet periodically with representatives of the dairy industry with regard to infant nutrition including infant formula.

The following table shows details of meetings held by Department officials from Assistant Principal level upwards since 2016, for which details are readily available. I have been advised that it has not been possible in the time available to conduct a comprehensive review of archived email records to check for any additional meetings which may have taken place. If the Deputy wishes, results of a search for any additional records can be provided in due course.

Date	Attendees	Discussion points
24/03/2017	DAFM Officials including AP and AP equivalents upwards as well as representatives of IF companies.	IF Industry Seminar
05/07/2019	DAFM Management Board	Visit to IF production premises.
26/09/2019	DAFM AP and representatives of IF companies	Codex Committee on Nutrition and Foods for Special Dietary Purposes (FUF)
05/03/2020	DAFM Officials, representatives of IF companies & FSAI	IF Industry Seminar
21/07/2020	DAFM Officials including AP and AP equivalents upwards and IF company.	Compliance with Chinese IF requirements
22/04/2020	DAFM Officials including AP and AP equivalents upwards and IF companies.	Chinese registration requirement
30/07/2020	DAFM Officials including AP and AP equivalents upwards and IF company.	GB certification post Brexit
20/11/2020	DAFM Officials including AP and AP equivalents upwards and IF company.	GB certification post Brexit
14/01/2021	DAFM Officials including AP and AP equivalents upwards and IF company.	Premises Registration Process
18/01/2021	DAFM Officials including AP and AP equivalents upwards and IF company.	GB certification post Brexit
04/02/2021	DAFM Officials including AP and AP equivalents upwards and IF company	Premises Registration Process
28/04/2021	Minister Robert Troy, Minister Damien English, Officials from Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and DAFM Officials at AP level as well as representatives of IF company.	GB certification post Brexit
21/06/2021	DAFM Officials including AP and AP equivalents upwards and IF company.	Upcoming engagement between DAFM and officials from Chinese Ministry for State Administration and Market Regulation (SAMR)
21/06/2021	DAFM Officials including AP and AP equivalents upwards and IF company.	Upcoming engagement between DAFM and officials from Chinese Ministry for State Administration and Market Regulation (SAMR)
21/06/2021	DAFM Officials including AP and AP equivalents upwards and IF company.	Upcoming engagement between DAFM and officials from Chinese Ministry for State Administration and Market Regulation (SAMR)
25/08/21	DAFM Official at AP level and of IF company.	GB certification post Brexit
27/08/21	DAFM Officials including AP and AP equivalents upwards and IF company.	GB certification post Brexit

The Deputy should note that the table does not include the following:

- Inspections and audits by the Department's inspectorate staff of Food Business Operators who produce Infant Formula, as part of the Department's food safety control system;

- There are also a number of other industry forums which the Department hosts, for example, the Brexit Stakeholder meetings, at which representatives of Infant Formula producers

attend, where the subject matter would not specifically relate to infant nutrition and the issue of infant formula. Such meetings have not been included as they fall outside the scope of the Deputy's question.

### **Veterinary Services**

1535. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will withdraw proposals for veterinary prescriptions for essential parasite treatments (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41850/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** In line with findings from a 2019 Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA) Expert Task Force Report, antiparasitic veterinary medicines no longer meet exemption criteria in EU law which permits them to be supplied without a veterinary prescription. Therefore, from 28th January 2022 antiparasitic veterinary medicines will require a veterinary prescriptions before they can be supplied.

All current suppliers of antiparasitic veterinary medicines will continue to be legally permitted to supply these medicines post January 2022. The Department is actively working with all stakeholders to sustain a competitive market for the supply of these products. The ambition is to ensure Irish farmers are empowered to purchase medicines from their supplier of choice. Initiatives such as the development of a National Veterinary Prescribing System (NVPS) will help deliver on this ambition. The NVPS will result in a prescription being made available to a farmer by choice of email, text or in paper.

Farmers can then engage with Licensed Merchants, veterinary pharmacists or their veterinary practitioner in getting their prescription dispensed.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq1535-09-09-21\_en.pdf">NVPS</a>]

### **Departmental Funding**

1536. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter regarding a service (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41866/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Under the Rural Innovation and Development Fund, the Department has provided €800,000 in funding this year for the design, development and implementation of the national Social Farming Network as well as providing support towards a number of model social farms across Ireland.

Following a competitive public procurement procedure, Kerry Social Farming together with three other organisations were successful in securing funding for 2021 with an option for an extension to this contract for a further four years. This is the maximum number of extensions allowed for under the current contracts.

### **Agriculture Industry**

1537. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Ma-

rine his position regarding the definite answers on grant aid for dairy investments going forward; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41915/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** With effect from the current tranche of TAMS II, tranche 23, applications for the following specific investments - Milking Machine, Dairy Structure, Milk Storage and Cooling or In-Parlour meal feeding system, must be in compliance with farm waste and farm nutrient storage requirements at the time of application. This tranche is currently open for applications until 5th November next.

These farm waste and storage requirements are laid down in Statutory Instrument S.I. No 31 of 2014 European Union (Good Agricultural Practice for Protection of Waters) Regulation 2014 up to 31st December 2017 and with Statutory Instrument (SI) 605/2017, European Union (Good Agricultural Practice for Protection of Waters) Regulations 2017 from 1 January 2018.

No final decisions have been made in relation to the detail of the interventions to be included in the CAP Strategic Plan (CSP) (2023-2027). To allow for the submission of the draft CSP by 1st January 2022, the Department is currently undertaking a public consultation on the draft CSP and written submissions were invited from interested parties by the closing date of 3rd September 2021.

My ambition is to continue to support productive farming whilst ensuring the highest environmental standards.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

1538. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the measures he is taking to promote or facilitate remote working for staff in his Department or bodies under the aegis of his Department; the costs this has generated in terms of the provision of laptops, desktop computers or contributions to wi-fi costs or phone-related expenses; the number of staff who have applied for permission to work from home on a permanent or hybrid-model basis (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41946/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** All Departments and Offices are currently working in line with the Government's COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. To enable staff to work from home during the course of the pandemic, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine equipped staff with IT hardware and software including laptops, phones and software licences. The total spend on this to support remote working is in the region of €1M, which includes devices purchased for new hires since March 2020, as well as costs that were budgeted for computer device replacements. These purchases will continue to be used as the staff's primary computer and communications devices, in-line with the Department's strategy to enable the future of blended working.

As we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis, the Department will facilitate a meaningful transition back to the normal place of work, particularly for staff who have been working from home for the majority of the period in question. This will involve a gradual phased return of staff to the workplace and will be done in accordance with prevailing public health advice. This transition phase will involve for many staff a blend of remote working and attendance in the workplace.

A central policy framework for blended working in the civil service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives in the course of the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation-level blended working policies, tailored to the

specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

Following the transition phase out of the current COVID-19 related arrangements, it is intended that the Department will introduce a blended working policy in April 2022, in line with the timeframe agreed by Government. The purpose of this Departmental policy will be to facilitate an element of remote working, in tandem with attendance at the workplace, within a formalised structure which supports the business needs of the Department. Staff will be entitled to apply for blended working, and all applications will be considered bearing in mind the suitability of the applicant and the role for blended working arrangements, as well as the needs of the relevant team and business area.

Work is ongoing on the development of the policy and this will continue to involve significant and appropriate consultation with key stakeholders, including staff, unions and management, prior to agreement, publication and implementation. Engagement with state agencies under the aegis of DAFM has been ongoing with a view to facilitating a broad consistency of approach, and this engagement will continue to be maintained.

### **Agriculture Schemes**

1539. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding the sheep welfare scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41976/21]

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

I was pleased to be able to secure funding as part of Budget 2021 to facilitate the extension of the scheme into 2021 prior to the next CAP. Any further extension to the scheme for 2022 will be considered as part of the budgetary process in October.

The existing payment rate of €10 per eligible breeding ewe set under the current scheme was based on an assessment of the costs incurred and income foregone for the menu of actions set out under the scheme. These were agreed with the Commission when designing the scheme and as such, it is not proposed to amend the payment rates under the scheme at this point.

With regard to the new CAP, officials in the Department have been examining options to build on the existing Sheep Welfare Scheme. 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. 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). A public consultation on the draft interventions proposed for the CSP has recently ended and the submissions received are being reviewed. I will continue to consult on the content of the plan with the key stakeholders, through the CAP Consultative Committee and through additional public consultation later in the year.

Both I and the Government support the long-term development and viability of our sheep sector.

## Agriculture Schemes

1540. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding GLAS payments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41978/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The 10th amendment to the Rural Development Programme, which was recently approved by the EU Commission, provides for the possibility for the extension of the GLAS scheme in 2022. As with all relevant Rural Development schemes, consideration of an extension will be subject to the availability of national funding through the annual budget process in the autumn. This process is currently under way and the final funding figures will be confirmed on Budget day in October.

## Forestry Sector

1541. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if an application by a person (details supplied) in County Kerry for a felling licence will be processed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41980/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Department received an application for a tree felling licence from the person named in October 2020. Following an initial examination, archaeological sites and features were identified and the application was referred to my Department's Archaeological Unit. The application contains multiple plots with operations planned over 10 years and the site is close to five recorded monuments. Conditions for the protection of the archaeological features have been finalised with the National Monuments Service (NMS).

Furthermore, the proposed site lies near five designated sites. The possible effects of the tree felling operations may have on these sites cannot be excluded and, therefore, the application has been referred to the Department's Ecology Unit. The harvest plan has been submitted with the application, which has assisted with the ecological assessment of the proposed operations. The application was assigned to an ecologist and their examination of the application is almost complete. The application is now opened for 30 days' public consultation. When the public consultation closes, the ecologist will finalise the ecological reports, return the file to the forestry inspector who will review and make their recommendations and the decision should issue shortly thereafter.

## Forestry Sector

1542. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding forestry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41985/21]

1545. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will introduce a payment for eco systems (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41991/21]

1546. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41992/21]

1547. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding a forest owner producers organisation scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41994/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1542, 1545, 1546 and 1547 together.

As the Deputy is probably aware, 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 for the future of forests in Ireland. The new Forestry Programme will be the enabler of the short term goals of this new Forest Strategy and it will be the successor to the current Forestry Programme which is in place until the end of 2022.

Substantial work is under way on all the activities recommended by Jo O'Hara in her report. The first Project Woodland Project Board Interim Report submitted by the Project Board to my colleague Minister of State Pippa Hackett, who has overall responsibility for the sector, was published on 1st July 2021. The interim report is available for download from my Department's website ([www.gov.ie/en/publication/642e6-forestry/#project-woodland](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/642e6-forestry/#project-woodland)) and sets out progress on work undertaken by the Working Groups. The report also provides an overview on decisions taken by the Project Board to date. For example, the Project Board has agreed to advance two Working Group recommendations immediately: an external regulatory review and the conducting of a public consultation process on the new Forest Strategy.

Matters, such as payment for eco systems services in recognition of the range of the environmental services provided by forests, the removal of restrictions on planting productive marginal land, grant and premium structures, and support to producer groups will be part of the discussions that will take place as part of the development of the new Forest Strategy and Forestry Programme. There will be opportunity for all interested stakeholders to contribute to this process as part of the public consultation process.

In relation to Producer Groups, I would like to highlight a finding from the Mid-term review of the current Forestry Programme which found that that there are sufficient producer groups in place throughout the country and that there may be a requirement to amalgamate existing groups.

### **Grant Payments**

1543. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding a harvesting grant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41988/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Earlier this year, the Department reviewed its systems for the preparation of Appropriate Assessment Screening Determinations, Appropriate Assessment Reports and Appropriate Assessment Determinations for all forestry licence applications. The results of this review were notified to registered foresters by circular in June. This Circular emphasised the provision of a harvest plan in support of a felling application and advised that a Natura Impact Statement (NIS) should only be provided when requested.

While not mandatory, a harvest plan is recommended. It is straightforward for a registered forester to produce and can be prepared as part of the examination of a site for a forestry licence application. A forester will usually prepare a harvest plan as part of the contract for services,

that may include the felling and sale of the timber, and there would be no additional cost on the forest owner.

### **Agriculture Schemes**

1544. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will introduce a reconstituted scheme (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41990/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Since the first finding of ash dieback disease in Ireland, the Department has provided support to owners of ash plantations impacted by ash dieback disease through the ash dieback reconstitution scheme and more recently the Reconstitution and Underplanting Scheme introduced in July 2020.

By the end of 2019, well over 1,000 hectares of infected and associated ash plantations had been cleared and replanted with alternative species at a cost to the exchequer of over €7 million.

Premium payments are made from the time of establishment of the plantation up to the time the crop became infected and support through the RUS or preceding schemes was sought from my Department. Following approval into the RUS scheme, the re-start of premium payments begins from the date the last premium was paid and up to year 15 or year 20 as appropriate, rather than re-starting from year zero again.

Additional payments are available for site clearance and for the establishment of a replacement crop. The option not to re-plant is not possible because of the replanting obligations of the Forestry Act 2014. As advised in Circular 11/2021, older ash plantations (>25 years) also now qualify for consideration under RUS.

The Department has received 365 applications to date under the scheme and has approved 109. Our priority is to continue to work with applicants under the scheme and issue approvals as quickly as possible.

*Question No. 1545 answered with Question No. 1542.*

*Question No. 1546 answered with Question No. 1542.*

*Question No. 1547 answered with Question No. 1542.*

### **Forestry Sector**

1548. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding a national forest certification scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41995/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Forest certification has become widely accepted as being a necessary requirement for forest owners, not only to demonstrate sustainable forest management but also to gain access to markets that are increasingly demanding certified timber. Corporate and public procurement policies worldwide are driving growth in demand for credibly certified materials.

Ireland's entire Coillte forest estate is certified to the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and

Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification ( PEFC) standards. Certification in the private forest estate is low by comparison and only a small number of privately owned forests are FSC and or PEFC certified.

In order to help forest owners to certify their forests, the Department funded a pilot Certification Scheme which was completed successfully in 2018. Two groups were funded under this pilot Certification Scheme and both received certification at the time.

To facilitate forest owners in the certification process this funded project provided a wide range of standard templates and information which is available to download from the publicly accessible web page at the following link;

*[www.groupcertification.ie/resources](http://www.groupcertification.ie/resources)*.

While forest certification is a voluntary matter for forest owners, it is desirable that there would be an increased uptake from growers and support and involvement of all stakeholders.

Forest Certification is also assisted by my Department through the funding of Forest Management Plans for grant aided forests which is an important prerequisite during the independent certification process.

In addition, COFORD via my Department has commissioned a study on private forest certification in Ireland which is currently in the process of being carried out. The study involves engagement with stakeholders. This study will be made available once published later this year.

The Department has also approved funding to PEFC Ireland to part-fund the establishment of a working group comprised of industry stakeholders, in order to review the PEFC Irish Forest Certification Standard and the PEFC Ireland Scheme for sustainable Forest Management.

All these initiatives by the Department recognise the importance of forest certification and complement other licensing requirements which demonstrate sustainable forest management.

## **Farm Safety**

1549. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of his Department's farm safety research project BESAFE - Behaviours for Safer Farming: The health and safety of farmers is a significant challenge for the social sustainability of Irish agriculture; the funding allocated for the purposes of conducting this research; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42057/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The BeSAFE project commenced on 1st October 2018 and is due to run until 30th September 2023.

The project was awarded almost €600,000 under the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine's 2017 National Research Call and seeks to understand the behavioural context shaping farm safety in Ireland with the objective of:

Although still in comparatively early stages, the project has so far reported a number of findings in relation to farm accident and fatality trends, and in particular has demonstrated progressively declining fatal accidents in certain farming enterprises.

Work continues on other aspects of this project including Identifying knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and priorities among farmers regarding safety and risk management, designing and implementing pilot interventions, targeting improvements in risk perception concerning animal

and machinery related safety and developing safer working systems on farms for livestock handling and management of facilities.

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-14\\_pq154914092021\\_en.docx](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-14_pq154914092021_en.docx)>CarolNolanWrittenPQ</a>

### Grant Payments

1550. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if there will be no clawback of grants received in cases in which a farmer trading as a sole trader has grants less than €80 thousand received within the previous five-years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42100/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Under the TAMS terms and conditions it is possible that there may be a clawback of grants paid in individual cases in respect of non-compliance with the scheme's terms and conditions. Any clawback applied would depend on the individual circumstances of a case. Full details of the TAMS terms and conditions including the penalty schedule applicable are available on the Government of Ireland website.

### Grant Payments

1551. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider amending the rules governing the clawback of grants in excess of €80,000 on the basis of 100% reducing to 20% over five-years in a situation in which a partnership dissolution takes place in order to transfer the partnership business to a limited company if both in the partnership become shareholders in the limited company on a similar percentage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42101/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Under the terms and conditions of TAMS, a dissolution of a registered farm partnership following payment of grant-aid will result in the investment ceiling being reduced to the standard investment ceiling for individuals of €80,000. The rate of recoupment decreases by 20% for each year the partnership is in place following payment of the grant-aid. There is no proposal to amend these rules for the duration of TAMS.

### Forestry Sector

1552. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of a matter (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42102/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Along with Minister of State Pippa Hackett who has overall responsibility for the sector, I fully recognise the impact the current forestry licencing delays are having on the sector.

I am in regular and intensive consultation with all stakeholders, and it is my immediate priority to resolve the issues which have led to this backlog and to issue licences in the volume needed for this important sector to continue to contribute to our rural economy. I know too that afforestation is key to meeting our environmental objectives under the Climate Action Plan and in terms of biodiversity, as outlined in the Programme for Government.

The delays that have arisen were caused by changes to law and relevant court judgements which have required us to radically amend our licencing procedures. To find solutions towards resolving these issues, as well as focussing on woodland creation, Project Woodland was initiated early in 2021. It comprises four working groups, each with an independent chair and with members drawn from forestry and eNGO stakeholders on the Forestry Policy Group. The Project Board, led by Secretary General of the Department, meets regularly to monitor the progress of the working groups and a Project Manager has been assigned.

As part of Project Woodland, a tender has recently issued to source legal and environmental expertise to carry out an in-depth review of the forestry licencing system. It will review the existing statutory framework for the licencing of forestry activities in relation to environmental and public participation obligations in order that practical advice can be provided to the Department on how to work more efficiently within the existing legal framework.

The business systems analysis currently being undertaken by an independent systems analyst will interact with and run parallel with the regulatory review, so that best possible system improvements are delivered.

Alongside Project Woodland, the Department continues to look at system improvements which will increase processing time. A recent improvement introduced in the preparation of the various Appropriate Assessment documents have allowed for output improvements. These improvements have been rolled out to forest road licences and will shortly apply to afforestation.

On afforestation, forestry licences are valid for three years and at present there are 5,700ha of approved forestry ready to plant. The planting season normally runs from October to May annually. The Department has also assigned additional resources to afforestation licencing to increase output for the planting season this year.

In June this year, the Department issued 415 forestry licences. This output was interrupted in July and August by the introduction of a new requirement for public participation under SI 293/2021, signed on 25th June by the Minister for Housing Local Government and Heritage and which applies to all similar planning issues. However, last week licences returned to expected levels with 110 new licences issued and we expect this increased output to continue through to the end of the year.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate my commitment to supporting the forest sector and to building on the recent progress, so that a continual improvement in delivery is achieved.

### **Livestock Issues**

1553. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding stocking density and rates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42116/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Department has just completed a period of public consultation on the proposed draft interventions for Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 and I have asked my officials to consider your comments as part of the development of the CAP Strategic Plan.

In terms of relevant scheme proposals, the following should be noted:

For the Areas Facing Natural Constraints (ANC) Scheme, it is proposed that the minimum stocking level requirement will remain at 0.15 livestock units per hectare. The livestock re-

quirements can be met using the following animals, or a combination of these animals: cattle, sheep, goats, horses, donkeys or deer. Where justified on environmental grounds, a lower requirement may apply. Arable lands, which are payable in designated areas under the scheme, will not be subject to the minimum stocking requirements.

In the case of both the proposed suckler carbon efficiency scheme and the proposed sheep improvement scheme, there are no proposed stocking density limits, rather it is intended that payments will be made on stocking levels for an historical reference period as was the case with the sheep welfare scheme and the Beef Data and Genomics Programme (BDGP).

### **Agriculture Schemes**

1554. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on a matter regarding the case of persons (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42129/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The named persons submitted their Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) application on 23/03/2021 in which they declared certain parcels eligible for payment under the Basic Payment Scheme. Following a review parcels by Satellite Imagery a parcel within this application was identified as being burned between 1st March and 31st August. It is specified in the 2021 BPS Terms & Conditions that land burnt between 1st March and 31st August is not eligible for payment purposes under the Basic Payment Scheme. Accordingly, the burnt area has been deducted from the eligible area within the parcel leaving a reduced area upon which payment can be claimed for the 2021 BPS scheme year. The claiming of the ineligible area has resulted in an overclaim on this application.

My Department wrote to the persons named on 19th August 2021 advising them of position in relation to this application. This letter includes details of the applicant's right of review and the relevant steps to take to seek a review. An official from the Department will be in contact with the named persons to provide assistance in relation to this matter.

### **Grant Payments**

1555. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the issue of farm payments to farmers (details supplied) who were affected by the fires in the Killarney National Park will be addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42141/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The named person submitted his Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) application on 05/03/2021 in which he declared certain parcels eligible for payment under the Basic Payment Scheme. Following a review parcels by Satellite Imagery a parcel within this application was identified as being burned between 1st March and 31st August. It is specified in the 2021 BPS Terms & Conditions that land burnt between 1st March and 31st August is not eligible for payment purposes under the Basic Payment Scheme. Accordingly, the burnt area has been deducted from the eligible area within the parcel leaving a reduced area upon which payment can be claimed for the 2021 BPS scheme year. The claiming of the ineligible area has resulted in an overclaim on this application.

The Department wrote to the person named on 19th August 2021 advising him of position in

relation to this application. This letter includes details of the applicant's right of review and the relevant steps to take to seek a review. An official from the Department will be in contact with the named person to provide assistance in relation to this matter.

### **Grant Payments**

1556. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of farm payments for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42147/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The named person submitted his Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) application on 5th March 2021 in which he declared certain parcels eligible for payment under the Basic Payment Scheme. Following a review parcels by Satellite Imagery, a parcel within this application was identified as being burned between 1st March and 31st August. It is specified in the 2021 BPS Terms & Conditions that land burnt between these dates is not eligible for payment purposes under the Basic Payment Scheme. Accordingly, the burnt area has been deducted from the eligible area within the parcel leaving a reduced area upon which payment can be claimed for the 2021 BPS scheme year. The claiming of the ineligible area has resulted in an overclaim on this application.

The Department wrote to the person named on 19th August 2021 advising him of position in relation to this application. This letter includes details of the applicant's right of review and the relevant steps to take to seek a review. An official from the Department will be in contact with the named person to provide assistance in relation to this matter.

### **Veterinary Services**

1557. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps he is taking to ensure a competitive market for the supply of antiparasitic veterinary medicines in view of the fact that they no longer meet exemption criteria in EU law which permits them to be supplied without a veterinary prescription; the reason his Department did not seek to secure a derogation to Regulation 2019/6 prior to it coming into force in January 2019 to allow persons other than veterinarians to issue prescriptions;; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42156/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** All current suppliers of antiparasitic veterinary medicines will continue to be legally permitted to supply these medicines post January 2022. My Department is actively working with all stakeholders through the Antiparasitic Resistance Stakeholder Group to sustain a competitive market for the supply of these products. The ambition is to ensure Irish farmers are empowered to purchase medicines from their supplier of choice. Initiatives such as the development of a National Veterinary Prescribing System (NVPS) will help deliver on this ambition. The NVPS will result in a prescription being made available to a farmer by choice of email, text or in paper. Farmers can then engage with Licensed Merchants, veterinary pharmacists or their veterinary practitioner in getting their prescription dispensed.

Negotiations on Regulation 2019/6 were finalised in early 2019. At that time, antiparasitic veterinary medicines could be supplied in Ireland without the requirement for a veterinary prescription. Therefore, in the course of negotiations on the Regulation, there was no rationale for Ireland to seek a derogation permitting persons other than veterinary practitioners to issue veterinary prescriptions for these medicines. Following the coming into force of Regulation

2019/6 in January 2019, a Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA) Expert Task Force undertook a review of antiparasitic veterinary medicines which confirmed that they no longer met the exemption criteria in EU law which permitted them to be supplied without a veterinary prescription. These conclusions were issued in a report in December 2019 and is available here [http://www.hpra.ie/docs/default-source/default-document-library/report\\_final\\_2019-12-6.pdf?sfvrsn=0](http://www.hpra.ie/docs/default-source/default-document-library/report_final_2019-12-6.pdf?sfvrsn=0).

As a result, under EU law antiparasitic veterinary medicinal products must be upregulated to Prescription Only Medicine (POM) in Ireland from January 2022.

### Grant Payments

1558. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter regarding the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42167/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The named person submitted their Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) application on 12th May 2021 in which he declared certain parcels eligible for payment under the Basic Payment Scheme. Following a review parcels by Satellite Imagery parcels within this application were identified as being burned between 1st March and 31st August. It is specified in the 2021 BPS Terms & Conditions that land burnt between 1st March and 31st August is not eligible for payment purposes under the Basic Payment Scheme.

Accordingly, the burnt area has been deducted from the eligible area within the parcel leaving a reduced area upon which payment can be claimed for the 2021 BPS scheme year. The claiming of the ineligible area has resulted in an overclaim on this application.

My Department wrote to the person named on 19th August 2021 advising them of position in relation to this application. This letter includes details of the applicant's right of review and the relevant steps to take to seek a review. An official from my Department will be in contact with the named person to provide assistance in relation to this matter

### Grant Payments

1559. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter regarding the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42168/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The named person submitted her Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) application on 23/03/2021 in which she declared certain parcels eligible for payment under the Basic Payment Scheme. Following a review parcels by Satellite Imagery a parcel within this application was identified as being burned between 1st March and 31st August. It is specified in the 2021 BPS Terms & Conditions that land burnt between 1st March and 31st August is not eligible for payment purposes under the Basic Payment Scheme. Accordingly, the burnt area has been deducted from the eligible area within the parcel leaving a reduced area upon which payment can be claimed for the 2021 BPS scheme year. The claiming of the ineligible area has resulted in an overclaim on this application.

My Department wrote to the person named on 19th August 2021 advising her of position in

relation to this application. This letter includes details of the applicant's right of review and the relevant steps to take to seek a review. An official from my Department will be in contact with the named person to provide assistance in relation to this matter.

### **Livestock Issues**

1560. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the work carried out by his Department to conduct a consultation process with local authorities and other stakeholders to bring a cohesive national approach to the control of horses with a view to bringing forward legislative proposals to update the Control of Horses Act 1996; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42206/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Control of Horses Act, 1996 is currently under review within the Department and plans for replacement legislation are well advanced. The aims of the replacement legislation is to simplify and clarify procedures in the Act in terms of the control of horses - and their seizure and disposal as necessary.

A consultation process has begun. with initial engagement with Local Authority veterinary officers to begin this process. A broad stakeholder engagement process will follow to facilitate a cohesive national approach in considering and implementing the proposals.

### **Livestock Issues**

1561. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of his plans to review and enhance equine identification and traceability; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42207/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** In keeping with my commitment to review and enhance the equine identification and tracing system as set out in Ireland's Welfare Strategy 2021-2025, I have initiated the undertaking of the first ever annual equine census in November 2021. Advertisement of this census will commence in the coming weeks.

The initial purpose of the census is to establish a link between each equine kept in the State and the premises on which it is kept on census date. The information submitted will provide important information in the event of an equine disease outbreak, in addressing public health concerns and in dealing with lost, straying or stolen horses

This census data will be built on in early 2022 when I propose to provide equine keepers with limited access to the Department's Animal identification and Movement (AIM) system, which houses the central equine database, allowing them to notify the Department directly when an equine moves residence. This will facilitate compliance with the EU Animal Health Law requirement to record the habitual residence of all equines on the central equine database.

It is expected that the linking of each equine to its place of residence will further enhance compliance with equine legislation where equine keepers are responsible for the health and welfare of all equines in their care.

### **Wildlife Protection**

1562. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of his plans to extend the badger vaccination programme nationwide; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42208/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Ireland's TB eradication programme is informed by peer-reviewed scientific research. There is a proven link between TB infection in badgers and bovine TB.

Badger culling has been demonstrated to be highly effective in reducing the burden of bovine TB on Irish family farms for over 20 years. However, DAFM is currently committed to reducing badger culling in favour of badger vaccination which is more sustainable in the long term for both ecological and disease reasons, in line with the Programme for Government commitment. This is possible because badger vaccination has been demonstrated to be effective in reducing badger to badger TB transmission and not to be inferior to badger culling when introduced to areas with low badger densities and reduced prevalence of TB.

The current policy is to vaccinate badgers to prevent disease outbreaks and to cull badgers where necessary in response to outbreaks in areas where epidemiological investigations have demonstrated the link between badgers and TB breakdowns on cattle farms. Areas where badger culling may previously have taken place are being incorporated into the badger vaccination programme on an ongoing basis but only when any underlying disease spread to cattle from wildlife has been suppressed.

Since the commencement of badger vaccination in 2018, 19,079 Km<sup>2</sup> of land has been switched to vaccination on a phased basis and this will continue. The scientific evidence for the efficacy of badger culling is well established and the evidence to support badger vaccination within the TB eradication scheme is being added to on an ongoing basis as additional research is published in peer reviewed scientific journals. DAFM is currently collaborating with University College Dublin and the University of Wageningen to validate the efficacy of vaccination in the field and to model where higher risks exist at a local farm level which will support better targeting of TB controls in future years.

As the level of badger vaccination increases, it is expected that there will be fewer wildlife driven TB outbreaks in cattle and thus less need for badger culling. It is likely, however, that some level of badger culling will remain necessary until TB levels have significantly reduced.

DAFM provides advice to farmers on how to reduce the risk of TB from wildlife which can be accessed at; [www.bovinetb.ie](http://www.bovinetb.ie).

## Animal Welfare

1563. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of his plans for Teagasc to mainstream animal welfare considerations across its teaching and advisory services for farmers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42209/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I have asked Teagasc, Ireland's Agricultural Training and Advisory body, to mainstream animal welfare considerations across its teaching and advisory services for farmers and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Teagasc continues to provide well developed courses and training opportunities for the farming community with a strong emphasis on animal husbandry. In line with the initiative outlined in Ireland's Animal Welfare Strategy 2021-2025, Teagasc courses will continue to evolve,

ensuring that clear consistent animal welfare considerations are promoted across all its teaching and advisory services for farmers.

Teagasc is actively committed to developing and improving animal welfare across the agricultural sector. Animal welfare is an ongoing focal point within educational courses on live-stock production and husbandry within the education and teaching programmes, and also within advisory programmes, activities and consultations with farmers. Teagasc also has targeted specific actions around animal welfare in their current Statement of Strategy which align with our National Animal Welfare Strategy, including the commitment to mainstreaming welfare considerations across all relevant research, knowledge transfer and training programmes.

### **Animal Welfare**

1564. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of his plans to establish a Chair in Animal Welfare and Veterinary Ethics in University College Dublin; the projected costs associated with this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42210/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The first Chair of Animal Welfare & Veterinary Ethics at the UCD School of Veterinary Medicine was appointed in January 2021, supported by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and contributing to scientific leadership at a national level.

The Department is committed to providing annual funding of €120k towards the post for a six year period. The role will have a focus on farm animals and will further strengthen the work already being carried out in UCD in this area.

The creation of this post aligns with the goals of the Strategy and the School of Veterinary Medicine's 'One Health, One Welfare' Strategic Plan. The remit of the post is to conduct studies in animal welfare, sustainable agriculture and veterinary ethics to inform policy that will have a positive impact on society.

This appointment enhances academic expertise and scientific leadership, while furthering primary and continuing education for veterinary professionals, promoting research and contributing to policy developments, and supporting UCD's key role in the newly established EU Reference Centre for Ruminant and Equine Welfare.

The establishment of the Chair is a key component of the recently published national Animal Welfare Strategy 2021-2025 and marks one way in which the UCD School of Veterinary Medicine and DAFM will work collaboratively to achieve the goals set out in the new strategy.

Societal knowledge, perceptions and expectations regarding the welfare of animals and ethical consideration regarding the keeping and use of animals is rapidly evolving. The UCD School of Veterinary Medicine and my Department recognise this, both in the context of veterinary education and research, and in the context of sectoral and societal discourse on animal welfare and ethics in Ireland.

### **Animal Welfare**

1565. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of his plans to establish an independently chaired Advisory Council on Companion Animal Welfare; if a call for positions on the Advisory Council has been issued; the expected

membership numbers and the remuneration that will be provided to each member; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42211/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Animal Welfare Strategy 2021-2025 includes a commitment to establish an Advisory Council on Companion Animal Welfare (ACCAW). Following the appointment of a Chair, I have identified a number of organisations and individuals with a diverse range of skillsets to advise me on matters relating to companion animals. This week, I will be writing to these organisations to put forward candidates for membership.

The Chair of the ACCAW will be compensated at the appropriate Civil Service per diem rate for chairing a public committee. No other Council members will receive compensation for their attendance and input. The Council will be made up of a Chair and approximately 12 members, subject to review.

### Waterways Issues

1566. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the systems that are in place to issue licences to allow access to a lakeside slipway (details supplied) in County Westmeath; the way these licences are issued; the frequency with which they are renewed; the cost to obtain a licence; the maximum number of licences issued in a given year at this location; if there is a waiting list for applicants to gain access to this location; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42231/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Coillte issue licences to moor boats at their property on Lough Sheelin. However, Coillte CGA was established as a private commercial company under the Forestry Act, 1988 and day-to-day operational matters such as this are the responsibility of the company.

I have therefore passed the questions raised to Coillte for response and direct reply to the Deputy.

### Agriculture Schemes

1567. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address the case of a person (details supplied) regarding the BEEP scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42263/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The objective of the Beef Environmental Efficiency Programme – Suckler (BEEP-S) is to further increase economic and environmental efficiency in the suckler herd through better quality data on herd performance, supporting decision making on farm and support of best practice in welfare management. The scheme in 2021 is an annual scheme as was the scheme in 2020 and the pilot in 2019.

Applications for BEEP-S 2021 were made via the Department's online application system at [www.agfood.ie](http://www.agfood.ie). The scheme opened for applications on 16th March 2021 and the closing date for receipt of applications was Monday 26th April 2021. There was a 25 calendar day period after the closing date for the acceptance of late applications.

As with many payment schemes that are applied for on-line and administered by the Department, applicants may lodge the application themselves or alternatively they may authorise an

agent to lodge the application on their behalf.

The Department issued two Press Releases on 16th March and 13th April 2021 on the BEEP-S and Dairy Beef schemes for 2021.

In addition, the Department issued five text reminders regarding BEEP-S to those who are registered to receive texts from the Department. The first two texts went to just over 107,000 people on each occasion while the fourth text on 21st April 2021 went to just over 8,000 farmers who were participants in the 2020 BEEP-S but who, as of that date, had not yet applied for BEEP-S 2021.

The person named had not opted to receive texts from the Department and therefore the Department was precluded from sending communications to him by text.

There is no record of any attempt to create or lodge a BEEP-S 2021 application in respect of the named person. The Department received correspondence requesting a review of the non-submission of a BEEP-S application in July 2021 and again in August, 2021. Officials responded to both letters in July and August, 2021 with the August letter advising of the right to appeal to the Agriculture Appeals Office.

### **Agriculture Schemes**

1568. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a BPS payment will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42267/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The named person submitted their Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) application on 12th May 2021 in which he declared certain parcels eligible for payment under the Basic Payment Scheme. Following a review parcels by Satellite Imagery parcels within this application were identified as being burned between the 1st March and 31st August. It is specified in the 2021 BPS Terms & Conditions that land burnt between these dates is not eligible for payment purposes under the Basic Payment Scheme. Accordingly, the burnt area has been deducted from the eligible area within the parcel leaving a reduced area upon which payment can be claimed for the 2021 BPS scheme year. The claiming of the ineligible area has resulted in an overclaim on this application.

The Department wrote to the person named on 19th August 2021 advising him of the position in relation to this application. This letter includes details of the applicant's right of review and the relevant steps to take to seek a review. An official from the Department will be in contact with the named person to provide assistance in relation to this matter.

### **Agriculture Schemes**

1569. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a BPS payment for 2021 will issue to persons (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42268/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The named persons submitted their Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) application on 23rd March 2021 in which they declared certain parcels eligible for payment under the Basic Payment Scheme. Following a review parcels by Satellite Imagery a parcel within this application was identified as being burned between the 1st March and the 31st August. It is specified in the 2021 BPS

Terms & Conditions that land burnt between the 1st March and 31st August is not eligible for payment purposes under the Basic Payment Scheme. Accordingly, the burnt area has been deducted from the eligible area within the parcel leaving a reduced area upon which payment can be claimed for the 2021 BPS scheme year. The claiming of the ineligible area has resulted in an overclaim on this application.

The Department wrote to the persons named on 19th August 2021 advising them of position in relation to this application. This letter includes details of the applicant's right of review and the relevant steps to take to seek a review. An official from the Department will be in contact with the applicants to provide assistance in relation to this matter.

### **Agriculture Schemes**

1570. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of an application by persons (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42272/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** An application for the Native Woodland Scheme was submitted on behalf of the persons named in June 2020 and is currently referred to my Department's Ecology Unit. An ecologist has been assigned to the application and, on initial overview, the ecologist has determined that additional information would be required. An official will shortly be in touch with the applicant's Registered Forester to discuss requirements for the application. Once any information sought it provided the application will be considered further.

### **Agriculture Schemes**

1571. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the intentions of his Department and progress made to date in providing grant funding for agricultural bridges and underpasses for landholders whose farms are currently divided by road, rail, river or canal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42358/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** There are a wide variety of items available under the suite of seven measures under TAMS. However, funding for cattle underpasses is not included. To date, total expenditure under the seven measures of the TAMS, including transitional expenditure, has reached in excess of €304m with commitments of an additional €145m made to scheme participants who have yet to draw down those grants.

Some 43,588 applications have been approved under the scheme. All outstanding approvals issued represent potential outstanding liabilities for the Department and we must have a budget in place to pay these claims. As a result, it is not possible to consider adding additional items such as cattle underpasses to the comprehensive list of investment items already available under TAMS II.

No decision has been made in relation to the interventions to be included in the CAP Strategic Plan (CSP)(2023-2027). To allow for the submission of the draft CSP by the 1st January 2022, the Department is currently undertaking a public consultation on the draft CSP and written submissions were invited from interested parties by the closing date of 3rd September 2021.

### **Fishing Industry**

1572. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of landings at Dingle and Castletownbere ports from Irish and non-Irish vessels for each of the 36 months from January 2018 to December 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42372/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Department owns, operates and maintains six designated State-owned Fishery Harbour Centres, located at Castletownbere, Dingle, Dunmore East, Howth, Killybegs and Ros An Mhíl under statute. The Department became responsible for the Fishery Harbour Centres in October 2007. The Fishery Harbour Centres were established under the Fishery Harbour Centre Act 1968 (as amended) as centres in which to promote and develop sea fishing activities.

The Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) was established under the Sea Fisheries and Maritime Act 2006 and is responsible (in conjunction with the Irish Naval Service) for the control and enforcement of Fisheries legislation. In this regard, the SFPA is the single legal competent authority responsible for the collection and reporting of fish landings into Ireland.

I have forwarded your question to the SFPA and have asked them to revert directly to the Deputy with the information requested.

### **Fishing Industry**

1573. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of Irish and non-Irish vessels landing fish at Dingle and Castletownbere ports for each of the 36 months from January 2018 to December 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42373/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Department owns, operates and maintains six designated State-owned Fishery Harbour Centres, located at Castletownbere, Dingle, Dunmore East, Howth, Killybegs and Ros An Mhíl under statute. The Department became responsible for the Fishery Harbour Centres in October 2007. The Fishery Harbour Centres were established under the Fishery Harbour Centre Act 1968 (as amended) as centres in which to promote and develop sea fishing activities.

The Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) was established under the Sea Fisheries and Maritime Act 2006 and is responsible (in conjunction with the Irish Naval Service) for the control and enforcement of Fisheries legislation. In this regard, the SFPA is the single legal competent authority responsible for the collection and reporting of fish landings into Ireland.

I have forwarded your question to the SFPA and have asked them to revert directly to the Deputy with the information requested.

### **Fishing Industry**

1574. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the value expressed in Euro of fish landed at Dingle and Castletownbere ports from Irish and non-Irish vessels for each of the 36 months from January 2018 to December 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42374/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Department owns, operates and maintains six designated State-owned Fishery Harbour Centres, located at Castletownbere, Dingle, Dunmore East, Howth, Killybegs and Ros An Mhíl under statute. The Department became responsible for the Fishery Harbour Centres in October 2007. The Fishery Harbour Centres were established under the Fishery Harbour Centre Act 1968 (as amended) as centres in which to promote and develop sea fishing activities.

The Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) was established under the Sea Fisheries and Maritime Act 2006 and is responsible (in conjunction with the Irish Naval Service) for the control and enforcement of Fisheries legislation. In this regard, the SFPA is the single legal competent authority responsible for the collection and reporting of fish landings into Ireland.

I have forwarded your question to the SFPA and have asked them to revert directly to the Deputy with the up to date figures requested. In the meantime, I wish to advise the Deputy that the SFPA publish Annual Statistics relating to landings in Irish ports and by Irish sea fishing vessels. These statistics are available on their website at [www.sfpa.ie/Statistics/Annual-statistics/Annual-Statistics](http://www.sfpa.ie/Statistics/Annual-statistics/Annual-Statistics).

### Fishing Industry

1575. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of bailiffs operating at Dingle and Castletownbere ports for the purposes of monitoring fish landings from Irish and non-Irish vessels; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42375/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) is an independent regulatory agency as set down in the Sea-Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006. My role as Minister relates solely to corporate governance.

The information requested with respect to the staffing levels operating at Dingle and Castletownbere ports is an operational matter for the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority. I have accordingly referred the Deputy's queries to the SFPA for attention and direct reply.

### Fishing Industry

1576. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the operational guidelines for weighing fish landings for each of Irish and non-Irish vessels in Dingle and Castletownbere ports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42376/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** 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. As Minister, I am expressly precluded from getting involved in operational matters.

I have accordingly referred the Deputy's queries to the SFPA for attention and direct reply.

### Brexit Issues

1577. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his attention has been drawn to issues UK citizens are experiencing when bringing pets here; if there are measures being considered to streamline this process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42388/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Since January 2021, as a consequence of the UK leaving the EU, there are additional requirements for pet cats, dogs and ferrets entering Ireland from Great Britain.

There are, however, no changes in respect of such pets entering Ireland from Northern Ireland.

Prior to January, cats, dogs and ferrets entering Ireland from the United Kingdom - as from all EU Member States - had to be microchipped, vaccinated against rabies and accompanied by a EU Pet Passport.

Since then, there are additional requirements in respect of each pet travelling, or returning, from Great Britain to Ireland:

- they may only enter Ireland through certain Travellers' Points of Entry - Dublin Airport, Dublin Port, Rosslare Port, Port of Cork at Ringaskiddy, Shannon Airport and Cork Airport.

- they must travel with either a health certificate issued by a UK official vet, or an EU pet passport. (EU pet passports issued by Northern Ireland remain valid for EU movement if they have been marked with a sticker by the issuing vet in Northern Ireland. An EU pet passport that was issued in GB is not valid for travel to the EU, even if it was issued before January 2021).

- Dogs travelling from, or returning from, Great Britain to Ireland require treatment against *Echinococcus multilocularis* (tapeworm) by a veterinarian 24 to 120 hours (1 to 5 days) before arrival in Ireland.

Since January 2021, the movement of pets between Ireland and Northern Ireland has been covered by the Ireland – Northern Ireland Protocol, which forms part of the broader EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement. Under the Protocol, Northern Ireland is subject to EU Regulation 576/2013 and so is still treated as if it were a Member State for the purposes of this Regulation.

Pet dogs, cats and ferrets travelling from Northern Ireland to Ireland must be microchipped, have a valid rabies vaccination and be accompanied by a valid EU or NI pet passport, or a EU health certificate - as heretofore.

The EU Commission has issued detailed guidance on this topic, as part of their series of Brexit Readiness Notices.

The Department has also issued a guidance document for pet travel after Brexit, and will continue to communicate with pet owners regarding the requirements for entering Ireland. The guidance document can be found [here](#).

### **Agriculture Schemes**

1578. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42389/21]

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

named person submitted their Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) application on 11/03/2021 in which he declared certain parcels eligible for payment under the Basic Payment Scheme. Following a review parcels by Satellite Imagery a parcel within this application was identified as being burned between 1st March and 31st August. It is specified in the 2021 BPS Terms & Conditions that land burnt between 1st March and the 31st August is not eligible for payment purposes under the Basic Payment Scheme. Accordingly, the burnt area has been deducted from the eligible area within the parcel leaving a reduced area upon which payment can be claimed for the 2021 BPS scheme year. The claiming of the ineligible area has resulted in an overclaim on this application.

The Department wrote to the person named on 19th August 2021 advising him of position in relation to this application. This letter includes details of the applicant's right of review and the relevant steps to take to seek a review.

An official from the Department will be in contact with the named person to provide assistance in relation to this matter.

### **Fishing Industry**

1579. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the process by which assessment and monitoring of inshore fishing information is gathered namely razor clam fishing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42394/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I understand the Deputy is referring to the assessment and monitoring of inshore fisheries, such as those for razor clam. I should advise the Deputy that my Department's role in sea-fisheries is to manage fishing opportunities available to the Irish fishing fleet and to prepare and oversee implementation of relevant policies in keeping with the Common Fisheries Policy.

Scientific assessments of sea-fish stocks, including inshore stocks, are carried out by the Marine Institute (MI). The MI is the statutory body whose function is inter alia to undertake sea-fisheries research, assess and advise on the sustainable exploitation of the marine fisheries resources in the waters around Ireland and on the impacts of fisheries on the ecosystem. The MI publishes annual stock books with information relevant to species subject to EU quotas fished both offshore and inshore and, together with BIM, also publishes the annual Shellfish Stocks and Fisheries Review that focuses on non-quota species such as razor clam, lobster and crab and the activity of the shellfish fleet. The MI publications can be found online at <https://oar.marine.ie/>.

The monitoring and control of fishing vessels within Ireland's Exclusive Fisheries Zone are law enforcement matters for the Irish control authorities. Under the Sea Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act, 2006, all operational issues of this nature are exclusively for the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) and the Naval Service. I am expressly precluded from getting involved in such operational matters.

### **Fishing Industry**

1580. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will outline any sustainable fishing advocacy groups he is aware of in County Louth including local regional branches. [42395/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** In responding to the Deputy I can advise that the coastal zone of County Louth comes under the area covered by the North East Regional Inshore Fisheries Forum (RIFF), which also includes the coastal zones of counties Meath and Dublin. The North East RIFF is part of the network of six Regional Forums around the coast that support the National Inshore Fisheries Forum (NIFF). The National and Regional Forums are consultative bodies, established to foster industry-led development of proposals for the management of non-quota stocks within six nautical miles of the Irish shore. Since their inception, the Forums have developed initiatives seeking to protect the future of the inshore sector, which is extremely important for Irish coastal communities. The Forums involve representation from inshore fishers, environmental interests, marine leisure, marine tourism and other marine stakeholders. A dedicated website provides information on the work of the Forums: [www.inshoreforums.ie](http://www.inshoreforums.ie).

In addition, the Irish fishing industry has several Producer Organisations, including the Killybegs Fishermen's Organisation (KFO), the Irish Fish Producers Organisation (IFPO), the Irish South and West Fish Producers Organisation (ISWFPO), the Irish South and East Fish Producers Organisation (ISEFPO) and the Irish Islands Marine Resource Organisation (IIMRO). Seafood processors are represented by the Irish Fish Processors and Exporters Association (IFPEA). All of these are national groups and cover, as appropriate, operators in County Louth. The Clogherhead Fishermen's Co-operative also is based in County Louth.

### **Trade Agreements**

1581. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine further to Parliamentary Question No. 566 of 9 July 2019, the steps he has taken to provide data to support the climate threats posed by the Mercosur deal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42521/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Following the announcement of the EU Mercosur political agreement in June 2019, the Government launched a full Economic and Sustainability Impact Assessment (ESIA) to establish the impact of the agreement on Ireland.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, which leads on Trade policy for Ireland, contracted Implement Consulting Group to carry out this independent research, and my Department and Teagasc participated on the Steering Committee.

The terms of reference for the ESIA included provision of a detailed analysis of potential environmental impacts, both direct and indirect, of the future agreement for Ireland and Mercosur, and the process included a wide-ranging consultation with Irish agri-food stakeholders and non-Governmental Organisations. The final report was published on 21st July 2021.

The environmental analysis in the ESIA estimates the environmental impact of the agreement to be relatively marginal.

Without mitigating actions, global Green House Gas (GHG) emissions are forecast to be 0.03% higher in 2035 than they would have been due to the Agreement. On land use and deforestation, it notes that the overall trade-induced impacts from the Agreement are projected to be marginal and, as a result, land use intensity in Mercosur is also expected to increase slightly by up to 1%, driven mainly by grains, vegetable and fruit production.

The agreement includes a detailed chapter on Sustainable Development, and recognises the need to address the urgent threat of climate change and the role that trade has in this regard.

It also underscores the importance of both Parties implementing the provisions of the Paris Agreement. The ESIA confirms this, and highlights an explicit mechanism whereby concerns can be raised about environmental and labour conditions on a bilateral basis in a manner that is transparent and subject to public accountability.

I believe it is critical that these environmental provisions are strictly adhered to for the agreement to progress. I also note that additional text to the Agreement on climate and deforestation is currently being negotiated to strengthen these provisions. The Government, including my Department, is inputting to these discussions at EU level. It makes no logical or moral sense for the Mercosur bloc to be allowed to flout environmental conditions when countries like Ireland play such a leadership role in this space.

### **Trade Data**

1582. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the awareness campaign that has taken place to date in relation to the transposition of the Unfair Trading Practices Directive into Irish law in April 2021; the number of complaints received by Enforcement Authority within his Department to date and the current status of such complaints; the investigations the Enforcement Authority has commenced on its own initiative since April 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42524/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** As the Deputy will be aware, one of the key principles of the Directive on Unfair Trading Practices (UTP) 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, ahead of the EU deadline of 1st May 2021. These Regulations are an important tool in strengthening the position of primary producers, who are key to the success of our sector.

The new legislation provides for the establishment of an Enforcement Authority to deal with complaints against unfair trading practices and, as an interim measure, I have established the Enforcement Authority in the Department pending the finalisation of primary legislation to establish a new Office of National Food Ombudsman or Regulator. 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.

I have recently appointed authorised officers to the Authority and work is ongoing to develop a communications and awareness-raising campaign which will commence shortly. No complaints have yet been received nor has the Authority initiated any investigations at this stage.

I am committed to bringing forward a National Food Ombudsman/Regulator office that will bring greater levels of transparency to the sector.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

1583. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps being taken to facilitate remote working within his Department in particular to encourage remote working for those who live in the regions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42700/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is a significant Civil Service employer and is also one of the most geographically diverse Departments, encompassing a very significant regional footprint.

The Department's staff already provide a variety of services to the Irish public and the agri-food sector in a diverse array of roles and from multiple regional locations. Department staff operate throughout the country working in our headquarters offices, regional and local offices, laboratories, fishery harbour centres, food production sites, farms, air and sea ports, as well as carrying out inspections on private farms and various food production facilities.

A central policy framework for blended working in the civil service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives in the course of the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation-level blended working policies, tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

Following the transition phase out of the current COVID-19 related arrangements, it is intended that my Department will introduce a blended working policy in April 2022, in line with the timeframe agreed by Government. The purpose of this Departmental policy will be to facilitate an element of remote working, in tandem with attendance at the workplace, within a formalised structure which supports the business needs of the Department. Staff will be entitled to apply for blended working, and all applications will be considered bearing in mind the suitability of the applicant and the role for blended working arrangements, as well as the needs of the relevant team and business area.

Work is ongoing on the development of the policy and this will continue to involve significant and appropriate consultation with key stakeholders, including staff, unions and management, prior to agreement, publication and implementation.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

1584. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the way in which his Department and public bodies and agencies under his remit are accommodating requests for persons to work from home. [42750/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** All Departments and Offices are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible.

As we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis, the Department will facilitate a meaningful transition back to the normal place of work, particularly for staff who have been working from home for the majority of the period in question. This will involve a gradual phased return of staff to the workplace and will be done in accordance with prevailing public health advice. This transition phase will involve for many staff a blend of remote working and attendance in the workplace.

A central policy framework for blended working in the civil service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives in the course of the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation-level blended working policies, tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

Following the transition phase out of the current COVID-19 related arrangements, it is

intended that the Department will introduce a blended working policy in April 2022, in line with the timeframe agreed by Government. The purpose of this Departmental policy will be to facilitate an element of remote working, in tandem with attendance at the workplace, within a formalised structure which supports the business needs of the Department. Staff will be entitled to apply for blended working, and all applications will be considered bearing in mind the suitability of the applicant and the role for blended working arrangements, as well as the needs of the relevant team and business area.

Work is ongoing on the development of the policy and this will continue to involve significant and appropriate consultation with key stakeholders, including staff, unions and management, prior to agreement, publication and implementation. Engagement with state agencies under the aegis of DAFM has been ongoing with a view to facilitating a broad consistency of approach, and this engagement will continue to be maintained.

### **Harbours and Piers**

1585. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount of funding his Department provided to each local authority for the maintenance and development of small piers and harbours annually since 2015. [42767/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Department provides funding to assist the coastal Local Authorities in carrying out small scale projects for the development and repair of Local Authority owned piers, harbours and slipways under the annual Fishery Harbour and Coastal Infrastructure Development Programme, subject to available Exchequer funding and overall national priorities.

Funding of €4.2m has been approved for the Local Authority element of my Department's 2021 Fishery Harbour and Coastal Infrastructure Development Programme. Between the years 2015-2020, the Local Authorities have received total funding of €15.6m under this Programme.

Please find attached table detailing the information you requested. <a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\_pq158509092021\_en.xlsx">Local Authority Funding 2015-2020</a>

### **Fishing Industry**

1586. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of the applications of the National Inshore Fishermen's Association and the National Inshore Fishermen's Organisation to become Producer Organisations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42768/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Department is the competent authority under the EU Common Market Organisation Regulation (1379/2013) for recognition of fisheries and aquaculture Producer Organisations.

In 2020, the Department received an application from the National Inshore Fishermen's Association CLG for recognition as a Producer Organisation. The Department wrote to the NIFA requesting additional information to assist in assessing the NIFA application against the mandatory recognition criteria. The NIFA responded on some of the issues concerned, but a response is awaited on some others. Pending receipt of that information, consideration of the application from the NIFA is paused. The officials have discussed the status of the application and the

outstanding information required with the NIFA on a number of occasions.

### **Forestry Sector**

1587. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine further to Parliamentary Question No. 1275 of 31 March 2021, if he will make available the Forestry District Inspector's report from their site visit on 30 January 2021. [42769/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine received the application referenced in December 2019. A Forestry District Inspector made a site visit on 30th January and this is referenced in the Inspectors Certification report, which may be viewed on the Forestry Licence Viewer.

This application was advertised on my Department's website on 20th December and was open for public consultation from that date. The licence issued on 3rd March, 2020 and 28 days were provided for appeal to the independent Forestry Appeals Committee. The decision was advertised on my Department's website. No appeal was received.

I am satisfied therefore that the application procedures were followed in full from application to the issuing of the licence.

### **Agriculture Industry**

1588. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his response to the increases in fertiliser prices. [42770/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I am aware that fertiliser is a huge cost on most farms. There has been a sharp increase in fertiliser prices since the start of this year. The fertiliser market is largely driven by global supply and demand and, while there are a number of factors influencing fertiliser price, the major driving factors for the current increase in prices are increased global demand driven by strong growth in agricultural commodity prices, rising production costs due to increased raw material and energy costs, and issues with supply for certain fertiliser products.

No fertilisers are manufactured in Ireland, resulting in indigenous fertiliser companies being price-takers, dependent on global supply and demand and subject to Euro exchange rates against the US dollar and other currencies.

Many farmers purchased their fertiliser earlier this year compared to previous years and were not exposed to recent price increases. However, it is expected that farmers will experience the full effect of higher fertiliser prices for the coming season. Fertiliser prices are projected to remain robust into next year as production is increased in response to rising global demand coupled with higher costs of production. As a key input in the food production system, the Department will be closely monitoring how the fertiliser market develops in the months ahead.

### **Agriculture Industry**

1589. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will require fertiliser producers to provide expiry dates and batch numbers on fertiliser products

for sale in the State. [42771/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The sale of fertiliser and lime in Ireland is regulated by both EU (Regulation (EC) No. 2003/2003) and Irish legislation (Statutory Instrument No. 248/1978). The majority of manufacturers of mineral fertiliser in Ireland market their products in accordance with Regulation (EC) No 2003/2003. This Regulation ensures that fertiliser products are labelled accurately and meet minimum nutrient requirements. However, current EU and National fertiliser regulations do not require batch numbers and expiry dates to be included on fertiliser products labels.

A new EU Fertiliser Products Regulation (FPR) (Regulation (EU) 2019/1009) is coming into effect next year. Under the new FPR, manufacturers will be obliged to ensure that the packaging of EU fertilising products bears a type number or a batch number or any other element to allow their identification.

With regard to the inclusion of expiry dates, there is no requirement to include production or expiry dates for mineral fertiliser products under the FPR. However, the FPR puts in place a conformity assessment system to provide for quality assurance for fertiliser products that are available on the market. This conformity system will ensure that the necessary conformity assessment requirements and procedures have been successfully completed before products are made available and ensures conformity testing of products is performed in a reliable and reproducible manner.

The FPR will also require the Department to continue to carry out market surveillance activities to ensure that fertiliser products being made available on the market comply with the requirements of the Regulation.

### **Animal Welfare**

1590. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the actions he is taking to implement a co-ordinated national antiparasitic programme. [42772/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Department established an antiparasitic resistance stakeholder group in June 2020 as part of a strategy to optimise animal health with regard to parasite control and to address antiparasitic resistance.

This stakeholder group provides a mechanism to guide and co-ordinate actions to address antiparasitic resistance in the animal health sector, and protect the efficacy of antiparasitics for the benefit of animal health and welfare.

The group is chaired by the Chief Veterinary Officer, has developed and agreed a plan currently containing 42 actions to address parasite control in a coordinated way at a national level.

### **Fishing Industry**

1591. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the level of financial support or revenue compensating package that the State will provide to the fish processing sector in Ireland to compensate for the serious loss of business and revenue due to Brexit; and the way this financial support compares to other affected EU Member States; and the financial supports provided to their fish processing sectors. [42828/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** In March 2021, I established a Seafood Sector Task Force comprised of stakeholders from our fisheries, aquaculture and seafood processing sectors, together with representatives of coastal community development groups, coastal local authorities, State enterprise development agencies and others. The remit of this Task Force is to examine the implications arising from the Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and the UK for the Irish Fishing industry and coastal communities particularly dependent upon it. I have asked the Task Force to outline initiatives that could be taken to provide supports for development and restructuring so as to ensure a profitable and sustainable fishing fleet and to identify opportunities for jobs and economic activity in coastal communities dependent on fishing.

In July 2021, I received an Interim Report of this Task Force which made some limited recommendations pending its full report which I expect to receive in the Autumn. While the Interim Report did not feature any specific recommendations relating to seafood processing, I understand that the Task Force is including this sector in its examination of the impacts of the TCA. I anticipate a Final Report from the Task Force later this year outlining its full recommendations.

### **Fishing Industry**

1592. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will provide the fish swaps carried out by vessels or EU member states that includes fish species and fish quota taken from the Irish EEZ in each of the years 2000 to 2021 inclusive in tabular form. [42829/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** As requested, I attach fish swaps carried out between Ireland and EU member states for each of the years 2000 to 2021 (to date) inclusive in tabular form. Please note that the swaps for 2021 includes swaps with the UK as a Third Country.

Please note that reports on swaps that were carried out over the last five years (2016 - 2020) are available on the Department's website.

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09\\_pq159209092021\\_en.xlsx](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-09_pq159209092021_en.xlsx)>Fish Swap 2000</a>

### **Wastewater Treatment**

1593. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he plans to introduce a grant scheme for farmers who will be required to put in place waste water tanks separate from effluent holding tanks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42850/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I presume the Deputy is referring to the ongoing review of Ireland's Nitrates Action Programme (NAP). This gives effect to the requirements of the Nitrates Directive in Ireland and is a critical piece of legislation that all farmers implement on their farms including maximum fertiliser rates, manure storage requirements, periods when manures cannot be spread etc. No policy decisions have yet been made on changes to the requirements for farmers.

These regulations contain specific measures to protect against nutrient pollution arising

from agricultural sources and this review will look at further practical ways that farmers can support this objective. The European Union (Good Agricultural Practice for Protection of Waters) Regulations 2017 (S.I. No. 605 of 2017 otherwise now as the Nitrates regulations are subject to review every 4 years with this to be concluded by year end.

The current regulations expire at the end of 2021 and a new Nitrates Action programme must be published at the beginning of 2022 with the revised regulations to remain in place until 2025.

It is important for all stakeholders to contribute to this important review and a public consultation process is underway. The closing date for receipt of responses is 20th September 2021. The consultation paper can be downloaded from the Departments' websites at [www.gov.ie/housing](http://www.gov.ie/housing) and [www.gov.ie/agriculture](http://www.gov.ie/agriculture).

### Forestry Sector

1594. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason for the decision to refuse remuneration to persons (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42885/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Project Woodland is founded on the principle of stakeholder involvement and I very much welcome the commitment shown by members who are actively partaking in the four Working Groups. These Working Groups afford members the opportunity to help shape the Department's response to licensing issues, to voice the concerns of those they represent and to help shape the future of Irish forestry policy. This is a voluntary commitment, which members undertake on behalf of those they represent, and while I very much appreciate their participation, there is no fee paid. This is standard for stakeholder groups engaging with the Department.

Project Woodland has introduced a framework for examining all aspects of licence delivery, as well as looking to the future of woodland creation. As part of the Project a tender has recently issued to source legal and environmental expertise to carry out an in-depth review of the forestry licensing system. It will review the existing statutory framework for the licencing of forestry activities in relation to environmental and public participation obligations in order that practical advice can be provided to the Department on how to work more efficiently within the existing legal framework.

The business systems analysis currently being undertaken by an independent systems analyst will interact with and run parallel with the regulatory review, so that best possible system improvements are delivered.

Alongside Project Woodland, the Department continues to look at system improvements which will increase processing time. A recent improvement introduced in the preparation of the various Appropriate Assessment documents have allowed for increased output and I expect this year's licencing output to be significantly up on last year.

On afforestation, forestry licences are valid for three years and at present there are 5,700ha of approved forestry ready to plant. The planting season normally runs from October to May annually. The Department has also assigned additional resources to afforestation licencing to increase output for the planting season this year.

In June this year, the Department issued 415 forestry licences. This output was interrupted in July and August by the introduction of a new requirement for public participation under SI

293/2021, signed on 25th June by the Minister for Housing Local Government and Heritage and which applies to all similar planning issues. However, last week licences returned to expected levels with 110 new licences issued and we expect this increased output to continue through to the end of the year.

In conclusion, along with Minister of State Pippa Hackett who has overall responsibility for the sector, I would like to reiterate my commitment to supporting the forest sector and to building on the recent progress, so that a continual improvement in delivery is achieved.

### **Government Communications**

1595. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Ministerial phones have been hacked or attempted to be hacked during the term of office. [42918/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** There has been no reported hacks or attempted hacks on Ministerial phones during the term of office.

### **Government Communications**

1596. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he has ever used his personal phones for Government business; and if so, if the personal phones have been hacked during his term of office. [42936/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** There has been no reported hacks or attempted hacks on Minister's personal phones during the term of office.

### **Freedom of Information**

1597. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of freedom of information requests responded to by his Department in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; the number of responses that included documents related to text messages and other phone message communications such as messages sent through an application (details supplied), in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42958/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has responded to 2,369 Freedom of Information requests from 2016 to date. As requested, the numbers of these have been set out in tabular form in the table below. Information regarding the breakdown of the type or format of each communication covered in these responses is not recorded by the Department in the manner requested by the Deputy.

In order to identify the different types of format of record included in each response would require a manual examination of each of the 2,369 responses and the very many records included in each of their attachments. Such a detailed review would divert resources away from other important work.

Year	Requests received
2016	347
2017	391
2018	535
2019	381
2020	381
2021 (up to 07/09/2021)	334
Total	2369

### Commissions of Investigation

1598. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the cost of each commission of investigation under the remit of his Department over the preceding decade. [42988/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I wish to advise the Deputy that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has not held any commissions of investigation over the last decade.

### Forestry Sector

1599. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a tree felling licence will be granted to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43030/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine recently carried out a review of tree felling licence application currently assigned to the Ecology Unit. This review examined the application documents on hand, to ensure they were sufficient to enable the ecological assessment of the application. Where documents were found to be inadequate or missing, a request was issued to the applicant's Registered Forester. A request issued to Mr. Cuddy's Registered Forester requesting a Harvest Plan.

I am advised that a Harvest Plan has now been received and the application will shortly be examined by an ecologist. Once that assessment is complete, the application will be returned to the Forestry District Inspector for their recommendations. I expect a decision to issue in the next two months.

### Ministerial Appointments

1600. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of formal and informal roles held by a person (details supplied) in the name of his Department or associated agency in the lifetime of this Government; when they were appointed to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43033/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I wish to advise the Deputy that the Department has no record of any formal or informal roles held by the person (details supplied) during the lifetime of this Government.

As regards the 12 State Bodies under the aegis of the Department, the information requested is an operational matter for the State Bodies themselves. I have referred the Deputy's question to the Agencies and have requested that a response should issue within 10 days.

### **Government Communications**

1601. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he and or his special advisers and or officials use or have used services (details supplied) to communicate in the past 18 months. [43065/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** In relation to the services listed by the Deputy, I can confirm that they have not been used by my officials or advisors and I have also not availed of the services referred to.

### **Fishing Industry**

1602. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department will provide an estimate in cooperation with the relevant fishermen and fishermen's co-ops as to the estimated financial loss to the Irish fishing fleet to date in 2021 as a result of the ongoing blockage of Irish fishing vessels from the waters around Rockall. [43159/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Ireland has never made any claims to Rockall, which is a small uninhabitable granite rock located approximately 160 nautical miles west of the Scottish islands of St. Kilda and some 230 nautical miles to the north-west of Donegal. Nor has Ireland ever recognised British sovereignty claims over Rockall, and accordingly has not recognised a 12 nautical mile territorial sea around it either. This remains the position of the Government.

The Government has been in contact with the relevant Scottish and UK authorities on Rockall over recent years and intensively since the beginning of the year.

Through this engagement, the Government is seeking to address the issues involved, reflecting the longstanding fisheries tradition in the area.

Both myself and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Simon Coveney T.D., as well as our respective officials, continue to consider all options for further engagement on the issues involved and are working closely together.

While engagement continues, there remains an increased risk of enforcement action being taken by Scottish fisheries control authorities against Irish vessels operating in the waters around Rockall at present.

Irish vessels have traditionally fished for haddock, squid and other species in the Rockall zone for many decades. These fisheries are of substantial economic importance to our fishing fleet based in Greencastle, Killybegs, Castletownbere and other ports around the country.

While haddock and other species may be fished outside the 12 nautical mile zone around Rockall, the squid fishery only occurs within the 12 nm zone. The interim report of the Seafood Sector Task Force, which was published in June, estimates that the total squid fishery is valued at around €6.6 million (based on 2019 landings).

I am acutely aware of the impact on our industry of the absence of a squid fishery this year. I have asked my Department to examine this matter through the framework of the Seafood Sector Task Force.

### **Fishing Industry**

1603. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the current status of the dispute between the EU Member States Commission, Norway and the Faroe Islands over mackerel quotas; and the way that dispute is reflected in reciprocal access to harbours by vessels from the relevant fleets in dispute. [43160/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** As the Deputy will be aware, earlier this year, Norway unilaterally declared a 55% increase in its Mackerel quota in 2021. In tonnage terms, this means an increase from 191,843 tonnes to 298,299 tonnes – an increase of 106,456 tonnes for 2021. The Norwegian decision seeks to increase its share of the North Eastern Mackerel Stock from 22.5% to 35%. The Faroe Islands have since followed suit and also increased their unilateral share by 55%.

Mackerel has been managed under a UN Coastal States Agreement that involved the EU, Norway and the Faroe Islands for the period 2014 to 2020. Iceland had refused to participate in the management agreement and the three parties to the agreement set aside a significant share of the share of the stock (15.6%) to cater for catches by Iceland as well as Greenland and Russia. For 2021, after Brexit and the UK departure from the EU, the parties involved agreed a global Total Allowable Catch level but were unable to agree on a new sharing arrangement. Consequently, there is currently no Coastal States Agreement on Mackerel in place.

While the EU and the UK have an agreed framework for fisheries under the TCA and recently concluded an annual agreement on shared stocks for 2021, there is no such bilateral agreement between Norway (and Faroes) and the UK. This was the justification used by both of these countries for increasing their mackerel share.

I have consistently made clear that this declaration by Norway and Faroes to hugely increase their mackerel quotas is a direct threat to the sustainability of the overall mackerel fishery and the future of the Irish pelagic fishing industry. There is no justification for this unilateral, opportunistic and unsustainable move. Both countries are now doing what they have consistently criticised Iceland for doing over the past decade. This is all the more disappointing because it undermines the critically important arrangements for joint management of mackerel by the Coastal States under the UN structure. As the scientific advice sets the sustainable level of fishing each year on mackerel, an increase by Norway means either the stock is overfished or other parties must take a smaller share. Neither option is acceptable.

Under the EU /UK Trade and Co-operation Agreement, there will be a 26% reduction in the Irish mackerel quota within the EU by 2026, with 60% of this reduction applied in 2021. Mackerel remains Ireland's most important fishery with a quota for 2021 of 60,849 tonnes valued at approximately €80m and it underpins the important Irish pelagic fish processing industry in the North West. Ireland is the largest Mackerel quota holder in the EU.

I have called on EU Commissioner Sinkevicius to reject completely this unilateral action by Norway to claim a much higher share of the mackerel stock. I wrote to him to ask him to respond without delay to this provocative and irresponsible action and to pursue actions available to the European Commission to protect the important EU mackerel fleets and mackerel processing industry. It is vital that the EU Commissioner takes urgent steps to counteract this

irresponsible action by Norway. Norway must understand that responsible partners do not get rewarded for such unacceptable action.

Our mackerel fishers have already taken unacceptable cuts to their share of the mackerel stock under the EU/UK TCA. I am working with them to pursue all avenues to deliver a more equitable burden sharing within the EU. I am very concerned that this action by Norway will add further uncertainty to the mackerel industry already trying to adjust to reduce quotas after Brexit.

Access to harbours is not covered under Coastal States Fisheries agreements. Direct landings by non EU vessels are regulated under both North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission Port State Control rules and Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fisheries legislation. Landings by Third country vessels can only take place in EU ports that have been designated specifically for this purpose and must fulfil all regulatory requirements including relevant documentation and prior notification. Ireland currently has two fully designated ports – Killybegs, Co. Donegal, and Castletownbere, Co. Cork with five other designated ports for landings by Northern Ireland vessels.

### **Harbours and Piers**

1604. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will share the new report in relation to the recent review of the cost benefit analysis of the Deep Water Quay project for Ros an Mhíl harbour; the timeline for the next steps to advance the project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43174/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Ros an Mhíl is one of six designated Fishery Harbour Centres owned, operated and maintained by the Department under statute. The other five are located at Castletownbere, Dingle, Dunmore East, Howth and Killybegs. Funding is made available on an annual basis by the Department to the Fishery Harbour Centres, including Ros an Mhíl, via the Fishery Harbour and Coastal Infrastructure Development Programme.

The possibility of a deep-water berthing project at Ros an Mhíl FHC has been mooted for some time, as of yet no decision has been made to invest in its development. Any decision to decide to proceed to a detailed design phase of such a project would be predicated on an overall decision to proceed with the project as a whole.

The Department took the prudent step to review the Wave Modelling studies previously carried out in 2002 to ensure that the analysis takes account of both the revised Quay Development layout and the influence of climate change on wave models affecting the FHC. Separately the Department has also commissioned a review of the Cost Benefit Analysis Report previously carried out by DKM Economic Consultants Ltd in 2017, again incorporating the revised Quay Development layout. Both studies are obviously interlinked in that the Wave Modelling outcome will likely influence the Cost Benefit Analysis and final reports are expected in November/December 2021.

As is the case regarding developments in the six Fishery Harbour Centres generally, any future decision on a possible deep-water berthing project in Ros an Mhíl FHC, will only be considered on the basis of available Exchequer funding and competing national priorities.

### **Forestry Sector**

1605. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a forestry application for a person (details supplied) in County Kerry will be processed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43179/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** An application for a tree felling licence for the person named is currently assigned to an ecologist. The ecological documents required to complete the assessment process have been drafted and the ecologist will shortly examine the application. Once the preliminary examination has been completed, the application will be opened for public consultation. When the 30-day public consultation period closes, the application will be returned to allow completion of the appropriate assessment by the ecologist, who will also consider any submissions received during the public consultation. The application will then be finalised by the forestry district inspector, and a decision will issue when available.

I would expect a decision to issue within three months.

### **Common Agricultural Policy**

1606. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address the concerns raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43196/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The development of the CAP Strategic Plan is well under way.

Most recently, a five-week public consultation on the draft interventions concluded on Friday 3rd September.

Over 1,000 submissions have been made during the public consultation process. The town-hall webinars were also well attended with in excess of 300 attending on each of the three nights. These submissions are under consideration and will be taken on board in the development of the plan.

Discussions with key stakeholders will continue through bilateral engagements, and through the CAP Consultative Committee, where all key stakeholders are represented. A statutory consultation on draft environmental report for the CAP Strategic Plan will be held in November with the final plan due for submission in December in advance of the 1st January 2022 deadline.

The plan will then be subject to an approval process with the Commission over a six or eight month period. All elements of the plan will be subject to review and scrutiny by the EU Commission in line with the relevant regulatory framework around the three general objectives of economic, environmental and social sustainability. The CAP Strategic Plan will commence on 1st January 2023.

As discussed during the public consultation process with respect to the Suckler Carbon Efficiency Scheme, the rationale for the proposed inclusion of the limit on herd expansion in participant herds in the context of this scheme is to ensure that participants do not increase their overall bovine animal emissions while participating in the voluntary environmental programme.

In relation to rewetting, the All-of-Government Climate Action Plan 2019 targets 40,000 hectares of reduced management intensity of grasslands on drained organic soils as part of Agriculture's contribution to achieving national climate change targets. Informed by the Teagasc Marginal Abatement Cost Curve (MACC) this rewetting initiative is estimated to contribute 4.4

Mt CO<sub>2</sub> eq cumulative abatement over the period 2021 to 2030.

Teagasc's calculations use Tier 1 values from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. They include direct CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, offsite CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from Dissolved Organic Carbon (DOC) in drainage water, methane emissions from both soils and open drainage ditches, as well as direct N<sub>2</sub>O emissions from soils.

Most importantly in relation to the question posed in the correspondence referred to by the Deputy, the increased methane emissions associated with re-wetting has been included in the calculations and the balance of emissions still return an overall emissions reduction.

### **Departmental Data**

1607. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the current policy regarding the employment of persons with disabilities in her Department and in each State and semi-State body under the aegis of her Department; the disability quota of her Department at present; if there is an active campaign to increase the disability workforce from the current target of 3% to a minimum of 6% by 2024; if this quota has now been exceeded; if so, the details of same; if there has been an advertised competition in relation to the quota; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41600/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Department of Rural and Community Development was established on 19th July 2017 to provide a renewed and consolidated focus on rural and community development in Ireland.

My Department is strongly committed to the development and implementation of measures to promote and support the employment of individuals with disabilities, in line with legislation. The Department supports the best practice principles in this area, as set out in the 'Code of Practice for the employment of people with disability in the Civil Service'. All my Department's recruitment is through the Public Appointments Service (PAS) who have recently launched their Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2021-2023.

My Department's Disability returns report indicated that we have significantly exceeded the 3% target of employment of persons with disabilities as set out in The Disability Act 2005.

The Department has a Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) in place whose role is to assist and support staff with disabilities, and their line managers, by the provision of necessary information, appropriate contacts, guidance, suggestions and advice. The DLO also plays an important role in promoting awareness about disability across the Department. In March this year the Department provided a Disability Awareness Information session for all staff and is planning to hold Disability Awareness Training later in the year. My Department recently organised Outdoor Recreation Disability Awareness Sessions to our stakeholders and the Department's staff.

There are 4 agencies under the aegis of my Department: Pobal (Pobal is not classed as an agency for the purposes of the Disability Acts), The Charities Regulatory Authority, Water Safety Ireland, and the Western Development Commission, they are all independent agencies who manage their own corporate matters, corporate compliance, and staffing issues.

### **Agriculture Schemes**

1608. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of the pilot insurance indemnity policy for hill farmers; her plans to introduce this

scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41622/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department has, for some time, been examining how best to introduce a scheme to indemnify private land owners in upland areas who allow access to their lands for recreational purposes. This is a complex issue and my Department has been advised that an indemnity scheme such as has been proposed would require legislative provision and that a number of separate pieces of legislation might need to be amended.

In light of the complexities involved, my officials have been considering alternative pilot approaches, including an insurance solution, to address the matter on an interim basis. Through this process, a public liability insurance policy was secured by my Department for the two existing Mountain Access Project areas, the MacGillycuddy Reeks in Kerry and Binn Sléibhe in Galway, and came in to effect from 13th August 2021.

This pilot solution was developed in consultation with Comhairle na Tuaithe and is being implemented on a two year trial basis. There are some practical implementation issues to be finalised and these will be advanced through Comhairle na Tuaithe in the coming weeks. The policy represents a substantial step forward on this matter for landowners in the two Mountain Access Project areas involved.

Other options around indemnity and potential amendments to the Occupiers Liability Act will continue to be explored and progressed as appropriate over the coming months. I have also committed to engaging further with the Attorney General on this matter.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

1609. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the measures she is taking to promote or facilitate remote working for staff in her Department or bodies under the aegis of her Department; the costs this has generated in terms of the provision of laptops, desktop computers or contributions to wi-fi costs or phone-related expenses; the number of staff who have applied for permission to work from home on a permanent or hybrid-model basis (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41959/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Departments and Offices are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

The Department, like other civil service employers, hopes to transition staff back to the office during September 2021, on a staggered basis. It is intended that the enduring Blending Working policy will come into effect in April 2022. Currently, over 90% of my Department's staff are working either fully remotely or on a hybrid basis, this has been in place since March 2020 in line with public health advice.

The agencies under the remit of my Department are independent legal entities responsible for managing their own corporate affairs and staff issues in compliance with statutory obligations, including observing public health advice and managing staff attendance patterns in their offices and remotely.

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) services for my Department are provided by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform through the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer.

The following table sets out details of the costs for laptops/surface pros/hybrid devices, desktop computers, Wi-Fi and phone-related expenses incurred by my Department to facilitate remote working for staff since March 2020. The only additional costs incurred related to laptops/Surface Pros/Hybrid devices.

Description:	Total Expenditure since March 2020
Laptops/Surface Pros/Hybrids	€135,283.30
Desktop Computers	Nil
Wi-Fi costs	Nil
Phone-Related Expenses	Nil

My Department does not contribute to Wi-Fi costs incurred for home working. Furthermore no additional phone-related expenses have been incurred specifically for home working during the period.

### Departmental Schemes

1610. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will address a matter (details supplied) regarding funding; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41984/21]

**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 line with the the Government's Rural Development Policy for 2021-2025, '*Our Rural Future*', I announced details of a €70 million Transitional LEADER Programme which came into effect last April and will cover the period 2021-2022. €65 million of this budget is available to the 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.

A further €3 million of the funding is being allocated to support co-operation projects and innovation between LAGs, while the remaining €2 million is being provided to provide preparatory support for the next LEADER programme. Further funding opportunities under the LEADER Food Initiative remain in place until the entirety of funds are exhausted.

€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.

I am confident that this level of funding will be sufficient to continue operation of the LEADER Programme through the end of 2022. It is anticipated that the next CAP and LEADER programme will commence in early 2023.

1611. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of plans by the OPW to repair a road (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42071/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I am not aware that the OPW has any function in relation to the repair of roads generally although the Deputy may wish to contact the OPW directly in respect of the specific road he refers to.

My Department funds the Local Improvement Scheme, or LIS, which 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 relevant local authority. Eligible road projects under the Scheme include those that involve the construction or improvement of non-public roads which provide access to parcels of land of which two or more are owned or occupied by different persons engaged in separate agricultural activities.

The road referred to by the Deputy may be eligible under the Scheme. Eligibility under the scheme is determined by the relevant Local Authority which, in the case of the road referred to by the Deputy, would be Kerry County Council. I understand that the scheme is currently closed for new applications in County Kerry but it might, nonetheless, be worthwhile to discuss the potential eligibility of the road directly with Kerry County Council.

### **Telecommunications Infrastructure**

1612. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the timeframe in relation to the announcement of the future work programme of the mobile phone and broadband task force; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42285/21]

1613. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the progress on the evaluation of the issues that should be addressed by the mobile phone and broadband taskforce; the level of engagement she has had with multiple Departments and agencies regarding the taskforce; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42286/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1612 and 1613 together.

The Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce delivered more than 70 targeted actions over the three year period of its work programme, between 2016 and 2019. Among the targeted actions delivered by the Taskforce and its member organisations were large telecommunications infrastructural works; the introduction of the Broadband Officer role to every local authority; amendments to regulations, policies and practices; a range of consumer information and consumer protection measures; and the establishment of strong and open lines of communication between the various State actors in the sector and with the telecommunications industry via IBEC.

The Taskforce was the joint responsibility of my department and the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications. Both departments, and indeed I and my ministerial colleagues, remain deeply committed to improving telecommunications service availability in all areas of the State, not least rural areas. The contribution of the Taskforce in meeting these commitments is undeniable.

Following the completion of the three year work programme, a strong preference for the

Taskforce to continue was expressed by members and by numerous other interested parties. Accordingly, officials at my department and the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications were tasked with drawing up recommendations for the future direction and composition of a refreshed Taskforce. Their recommendations are being reviewed at present. Once this review has completed, I will discuss options for the future of the Taskforce with my ministerial colleagues.

Notwithstanding the completion of the Taskforce's work programme, I have continued to engage regularly with colleagues in Government, both national and local, with State agencies and regional development representatives and with commercial operators on a range of issues relevant to the development of rural connectivity. The lines of communication between former Taskforce members remain open and productive.

Through various recent schemes, including the recent Digital Innovation Programme, my department continues to encourage deeper collaboration between stakeholders. The rural development policy I launched this year, *Our Rural Future*, commits to a fully connected and digitally enabled Ireland. To this end I and my officials will continue to engage with the appropriate organisations on a multi-lateral or bi-lateral basis to ensure these commitments are met.

*Question No. 1613 answered with Question No. 1612.*

### **Flexible Work Practices**

1614. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the steps being taken to facilitate remote working within her Department in particular to encourage remote working for those who live in the regions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42713/21]

1615. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the way in which her Department and public bodies and agencies under her remit are accommodating requests for persons to work from home. [42763/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1614 and 1615 together.

Departments and Offices are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. A central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

My Department, like other civil service employers, hopes to transition staff back to the office during September 2021, on a staggered basis. It is intended that the enduring Blending Working policy will come into effect in April 2022. Currently, over 90% of my Department's staff are working either fully remotely or on a hybrid basis, this has been in place since March 2020 in line with public health advice.

The agencies under the remit of my Department are independent legal entities responsible for managing their own corporate affairs and staff issues in compliance with statutory obligations, including observing public health advice and managing staff attendance patterns in their offices and remotely.

*Question No. 1615 answered with Question No. 1614.*

### **Emergency Services**

1616. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will ensure that the leading lights on the helicopter pad on Cape Clear Island used for emergency services are repaired as a matter of urgency. [42804/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department has received an application for funding from Cork County Council, the local authority responsible for the helipad, in relation to this matter. I understand that my officials are awaiting further information from the local authority in relation to the works concerned and once this has been received a recommendation will be submitted for approval.

### **Rural Recreation Policy**

1617. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of her engagement with the West Cork Development Partnership concerning the employment of additional rural recreational officers. [42805/21]

**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 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 have been in contact with West Cork Development Partnership on a number of occasions. I understand that the company have 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 this issue will form part of the consideration of the the implementation of the Review of the Walks Scheme. The final report was received by my Department in July and I expect to soon be in a position to publish the report and respond to the concerns raised.

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.

### **Island Communities**

1618. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of the publication of an islands policy. [42806/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Work is continuing on the development of the new Islands Policy. My Department is currently engaging bilaterally with relevant Government Departments and Agencies to discuss the issues raised by island communities through the public consultation process 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 action points as it is developed. It is hoped that this element of the process will conclude shortly.

Work has begun on preparing an initial draft of the policy, but it is at a very early stage. It was initially 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. During the most recent bilateral meeting with the representative group for the islands, Comhdháil Oileán na hÉireann, members of that group stressed this point also.

My Department is continually raising island issues with other relevant Departments and Agencies. The inclusion of an action point particular to the islands in the recently published Housing for All strategy is an indication of the ongoing dialogue in this regard.

### **Government Communications**

1619. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if her Ministerial phones have been hacked or attempted to be hacked during the term of office. [42931/21]

1620. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she has ever used her personal phones for Government business; and if so, if the personal phones have been hacked during her term of office. [42949/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1619 and 1620 together.

I am not aware of any attempt to hack my phone.

*Question No. 1620 answered with Question No. 1619.*

### **Freedom of Information**

1621. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the number of freedom of information requests responded to by her Department in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; the number of responses that included documents related to text messages and other phone message communications such as messages sent through an application (details supplied) in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42971/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department was established on 19 July 2017 and has received the following FOI requests since that date:

Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021(at 06/09/2021)
Total received	14	58	79	58	32
Granted	4	14	31	14	6
Part-Granted	3	12	10	9	7
Refused	2	14	10	9	0
Withdrawn	3	6	10	11	8
Handled outside FOI	2	12	17	12	5
Transferred	0	0	1	1	0
Open requests			0	1	6
Internal Reviews	0	2	1	1	0
Decision Upheld		1	1	1	N/A
Decision Varied		1	0	0	N/A

DRCD does not generally conduct official business on platforms i.e through an application (details supplied), however, there was one response that included documents related to text messages Under the Freedom of Information Act, 2014, granted.

### Commissions of Investigation

1622. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the cost of each commission of investigation under the remit of her Department over the preceding decade. [42997/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I can confirm, that my Department, which was established on 19 July 2017, did not have any commissions of investigation conducted in the timeframe in question.

### Ministerial Appointments

1623. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the number of formal and informal roles held by a person (details supplied) in the name of her Department or associated agency in the lifetime of this Government; when they were appointed to same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43042/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I can confirm that Ms Katherine Zappone has not held roles, formal or informal, in the name of the Department of Rural and Community Development or associated agencies, in the lifetime of this Government.

### Government Communications

1624. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she and or her special advisers and or officials use or have used services (details supplied) to communicate in the past 18 months. [43078/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The services mentioned by the Deputy are not part of the portfolio of applications issued on Department of Rural and Community Development mobile devices and are not used to transact Departmental business.

