

## 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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### Cybersecurity Policy

1. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his Department's IT infrastructure is monitored for security breaches on a 24/7 basis; the guidance provided from Government on same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45308/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** My Department adopts a defence in depth approach to cyber security. This approach uses multiple layers and disparate systems to deliver security which is not dependent on any single component. Given the heightened level of risk which has pertained in recent months, my Department's technical staff has adopted a posture of increased vigilance and oversight of systems.

My Department takes advice from its own external security advisers, and monitors advice and guidance coming from the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) on any additional steps which should be implemented in the light of current risks.

On foot of increased threat levels from cyber criminals and the advice from the NCSC, my Department has implemented a number of additional controls, and has also reviewed existing controls to ensure that they are still being applied consistently.

Given the current threat levels and the significant resources which cyber criminals are prepared to use to hack into systems, it is important that we are not complacent in our approach to cyber security. Cyber security is an ongoing process in my Department, and we will continue to review the controls we have in place and implement new controls and protections where necessary and as new cyber defence technologies become available.

For operational and security reasons, we are advised by the NCSC not to disclose details of systems and processes which could in any way compromise cyber security measures in place in public bodies. In particular, it is not considered appropriate to disclose information which might assist criminals to identify potential vulnerabilities in departmental cyber security arrangements or to make comparisons of cyber defences between public bodies.

Therefore, it is not considered appropriate to disclose particular arrangements in place in relation to cyber security tools and services, and my Department does not comment on operational security matters.

### Flexible Work Practices

2. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Em-

ployment the steps taken by his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within his Department who have access to cloud services for remote video-conferencing and the capacity to work remotely; his plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45365/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** My Department and the agencies under its remit are driving the implementation of the National Remote Work Strategy, Making Remote Work, in a way which maximises its economic, social and environmental benefits. Each action in the Strategy has been attributed to lead actors for delivery and each action is scheduled to be delivered by the end of this year. Lead actors report progress on the actions to the Interdepartmental Group (IDG) on remote work which is coordinated by my Department. The IDG has so far met three times this year, most recently on September 7th. At these meetings it has been established that good progress is underway in achieving the actions by their deadlines. The IDG will meet again in November to further drive the implementation of the Strategy.

The provision of remote working infrastructure to all parts of the country is an important pillar of the Strategy. My Department is currently developing new Regional Enterprise Plans to 2024 in which there will be a focus on promoting remote working opportunities and investing in infrastructures across the nine regions. My Department also recently announced €10 million in funding for a new Regional Enterprise Transition Scheme. This scheme is administered by Enterprise Ireland and includes a €500,000 Feasibility Study to assist enterprise development projects, including the development of remote working and enterprise infrastructure.

On May 31st, the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Western Development Commission launched Ireland's first National Hub Network, ConnectedHubs.ie. This was followed on July 22nd with the announcement of €8.8 million in funding for 117 projects across Ireland as part of the Connected Hubs call. This investment will contribute to the ongoing development of the National Hub Network, which already includes 134 hubs and will grow on a phased basis to over 400 hubs throughout the country. The ConnectedHubs.ie platform is being widely marketed. This investment will bring significant employment opportunities to our regions and rural communities.

Agencies under the auspices of my Department are also playing an active role in implementing the National Remote Work Strategy. In April, the Workplace Relations Commission published the Code of Practice on the Right to Disconnect which will help employees to strike a better work-life balance and to switch off from work outside of normal working hours. This reflects the Government's wider commitment to create more flexible and family-friendly working arrangements which will benefit both employees and employers. The Health and Safety Authority has been providing ongoing guidance to employers and employees to ensure that remote working arrangements are implemented in a safe and sustainable way both during and beyond the pandemic.

IDA Ireland is engaging with its client base to share knowledge on the implementation of remote and hybrid working arrangements. These working models being promoted with international investors as part of IDA Ireland's balanced regional development agenda. A particular emphasis is being placed on the potential of remote work to attract and retain talent. IDA Ireland supported the ConnectedHubs.ie launch through its communication channels and social media, and the ConnectedHubs map has been incorporated into IDA's property marketing content. A number of recent regional jobs announcements have referenced roles being open on a remote working basis.

Enterprise Ireland has developed a Future of Work website featuring a range of resources to assist companies in transitioning to the remote, hybrid and flexible working cultures of the post-Covid environment. EI has been promoting this material to its client companies and beyond, and a new employer guide was launched at a webinar on June 22nd which was attended by over 200 people. EI is also supporting The National Association of Community Enterprise Centres to promote greater use of their associate hubs to assist with the training of hub managers and teams. EI is additionally a member of the Grow Remote Advisory Panel and represents the needs of Irish indigenous industry in the move to hybrid ways of working.

On June 28th, my Department launched the 'Making Remote Work' campaign across broadcast, print and social media to promote the Guidance for Working Remotely webpage. This webpage acts as a central access point for employers and employees and brings together the existing State guidance, legislation and advice on remote work into one place. The webpage includes an Employer Checklist to provide employers with a quick way to successfully navigate the adoption of remote working arrangements. The 'Making Remote Work' campaign is continuing, and the Government is encouraging workers and employers to discuss the kinds of remote working arrangements that may be suitable for their organisations.

As part of creating an environment conducive to remote work, my Department will soon legislate for the right for employees to request remote work. The report of the submissions received during the public consultation on the proposed measure was published on August 20th, and a working group has been established to draft the General Scheme of the Bill which will be presented to Government as soon as possible.

A vital part of ensuring the success of remote working arrangements now and in the future is ensuring that organisations and workers are equipped with the appropriate tools for communication and collaboration. I can confirm that within my Department, 100% core departmental staff have access to remote working and video conferencing tools, which were accessed through existing software licences held by the Department.

Taken together, my Department and its agencies have taken great strides in delivering the National Remote Working Strategy, and all actions remain on track to be delivered before the end of the year.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

3. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the steps taken by agencies under the remit of his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within these agencies who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; if there are plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45382/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** My Department and the agencies under its remit are driving the implementation of the National Remote Work Strategy, Making Remote Work, in a way which maximises its economic, social and environmental benefits. Each action in the Strategy has been attributed to lead actors for delivery and each action is scheduled to be delivered by the end of this year, with work being coordinated through the Interdepartmental Group (IDG) on remote work. The IDG has so far met three times this year, most recently on September 7th. At these meetings it has been established that good progress is underway in achieving the actions by their deadlines. The IDG will

meet again in November to further drive the implementation of the Strategy. Agencies under the remit of my Department playing a leading role in implementing elements of the Strategy and represented on the IDG include the Workplace Relations Commission, the Health and Safety Authority, Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland.

In April, the Workplace Relations Commission published the Code of Practice on the Right to Disconnect which will help employees to strike a better work-life balance and to switch off from work outside of normal working hours. This reflects both the Government's commitment to creating an environment conducive to remote work, as well as to creating more flexible and family-friendly working arrangements which will benefit both employees and employers. The Health and Safety Authority has been providing ongoing guidance to employers and employees to ensure that remote working arrangements are implemented in a safe and sustainable way both during and beyond the pandemic.

Both IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland have been active in promoting remote work amongst business, as well as raising awareness of the skills and training interventions which underpin the successful adoption of remote working practices. Both organisations have also been facilitating the provision of remote working infrastructure in all parts of the country.

IDA Ireland is engaging with its client base to share knowledge on the successful implementation of remote working arrangements. These working models are being promoted with international investors as part of IDA Ireland's balanced regional development agenda. A particular emphasis is being placed on the potential of remote work to attract and retain talent. Through its communication channels and social media, IDA Ireland supported the launch of Ireland's national hub network, ConnectedHubs.ie, by the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Western Development Condition at the end of May. A number of recent regional jobs announcements have referenced roles being open on a remote working basis.

Enterprise Ireland has developed a Future of Work website featuring a range of resources to assist companies in transitioning to the remote, hybrid and flexible working cultures of the post-Covid environment. EI has been promoting this material to its client companies and beyond, and a new employer guide was launched at a webinar on June 22nd which was attended by over 200 people. These resources have also been promoted through my Department's Guidance for Working Remotely webpage, Employer Checklist and 'Making Remote Work' media campaign which is encouraging workers and employers to discuss the kinds of remote working arrangements that may be suitable for their organisations. EI is additionally a member of the Grow Remote Advisory Panel and represents the needs of Irish indigenous industry in the move to hybrid ways of working. EI is also supporting the National Association of Community Enterprise Centres to promote greater use of their associate hubs to assist with the training of hub managers and teams.

My Department also recently announced €10 million in funding for a new Regional Enterprise Transition Scheme which is administered by Enterprise Ireland. The scheme includes a €500,000 Feasibility Study to assist enterprise development projects, including the development of remote working and enterprise infrastructure.

A vital part of ensuring the success of remote working arrangements now and in the future is ensuring that organisations and workers are equipped with the appropriate tools for communication and collaboration. Figures for the numbers of staff access to remote working and video conferencing tools within the agencies under my Department's remit are however an operational matter for the agencies themselves.

Taken together, agencies under the remit of my Department have taken great strides in delivering the National Remote Working Strategy, and all their actions remain on track to be

delivered before the end of the year.

### Work Permits

4. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his views on whether additional work visas need to be issued to non-EU nationals in order to tackle the labour force shortage in certain industries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45468/21]

**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.

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.

Consideration of the submissions received to the current occupations lists review is underway and scheduled to be finalised in the Autumn.

### Work Permits

5. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his plans to remove horticulture workers from the ineligible list for work permits for non-EU nationals entering Ireland considering the increasingly concerning labour shortage in this area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45471/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** Policy responsibility for the food production industry is a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

*Food Wise 2025* sets out a ten-year plan for the agri-food sector. It underlines the sector's unique and special position within the Irish economy, and it illustrates the potential which exists for this sector to grow even further. The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine chairs the Food Wise High Level Implementation Committee (HLIC), with senior representation from all the relevant departments, including an official from this Department, and State agencies. The creation of 23,000 additional jobs all along the supply chain from producer level to high-end value-added product development are among the ambitious and challenging growth projections for the industry over the timeframe of the plan.

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 bal-

anced 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.

In May 2018, following a detailed business case submitted by the sector, my Department introduced a pilot quota-based scheme to remove the occupations of horticulture worker, meat processing operative and dairy farm assistant from the ineligible occupations list. This pilot scheme proved very successful for a range of employers in the sector and 500 permits were made available to the Horticulture sector. At present, the three quotas created for Dairy Farm Worker, Horticulture Worker and Meat Processing Operative are 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.

Consideration of the submissions received to the current occupations lists review is underway, including from the horticulture sector, and scheduled to be finalised in the Autumn.

## **Work Permits**

**6. Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the status of the review by his Department of a submission (details supplied) to reopen the pilot work permit scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45472/21]

**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.

In May 2018, following a detailed business case submitted by the sector, my Department introduced a pilot quota-based scheme to remove the occupations of horticulture worker, meat processing operative and dairy farm assistant from the ineligible occupations list. This pilot scheme proved very successful for a range of employers in the agri-food sector. At present, the three quotas created for Dairy Farm Worker, Horticulture Worker and Meat Processing Operative are 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.

Consideration of the submissions received to the current occupations lists review is underway, including from the Irish Farmers Association, and scheduled to be finalised in the Autumn.

### **Natural Gas Imports**

7. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will issue a Ministerial policy directive under section 29 of the Planning Development Act 2000 to An Bord Pleanála that reflects the Government statement on the importation of fracked gas which includes a moratorium on the development of LNG terminals pending the review of supply. [45743/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I refer the Deputy to my reply to Question No 21 of 16th September 2021. The position is unchanged.

### **Cybersecurity Policy**

8. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if his Department's IT infrastructure is monitored for security breaches on a 24/7 basis; the guidance provided from Government on same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45309/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** For operational and security reasons, my department has been advised by the National Cyber Security Centre not to disclose details of the Department's cyber security arrangements.

It is not considered appropriate to disclose particular arrangements in place in relation to IT security tools and services.

### **Cybersecurity Policy**

9. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the guidance provided by the National Cyber Security Centre to Departments and agencies as to whether their IT infrastructure should be monitored on a 24/7 basis for security breaches; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45322/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** The National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) has a broad remit across the cyber security of Government ICT and critical national infrastructure. The NCSC has three main roles: national incident response; information sharing; and Building Resilience. The NCSC supports Government Departments and other public bodies to improve the resilience and security of their IT systems to better protect services that our people rely upon, and their data.

The NCSC provides general guidance and notifications of major incidents and vulnerabilities on an ongoing basis to all Departments and agencies. However, it should be noted that the responsibility for the integrity and security of individual ICT networks lies with each individual Department or agency. Accordingly, decisions in relation to monitoring of networks are a matter of each entity to consider independently based on individual requirements and resources

available.

*Question No. 10 resubmitted.*

### **Flexible Work Practices**

11. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps taken by his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within his Department who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; his plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45366/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** 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 end 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.

To enable staff to work remotely during the course of the pandemic, all staff in the Department have been provided with the capacity to work remotely with IT hardware and software including laptops, phones and software licences. The percentage of staff with the capability to remote work and have access to cloud services for videoconferencing amounts to approximately 100%.

During the course of the pandemic, my Department continues to ensure all staff have access to cloud service remote videoconferencing and have the capability to remote work. This is managed under the Office of Government Procurement framework for the provision of Microsoft Licensing Services.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

12. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps taken by agencies under the remit of his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within these agencies who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; if there are plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45383/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** 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 appropriate information in respect of their organisations.

### **Energy Conservation**

13. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the breakdown of waiting times for assessments and completion of works under the SEAI warmer homes scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45396/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme delivers a range of energy efficiency measures free of charge to low income households vulnerable to energy poverty. To date, over 143,000 homes have received free upgrades under the scheme. In the first six months of 2021, the average value of the energy efficiency measures provided per household was approximately €17,100.

There are currently just over 7,000 homeowners on the Warmer Homes Scheme work programme. Data from the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) indicates that for homes completed in the first half of 2021, the longest time waiting for a survey from application date was approximately 23 months countrywide and the average time from application to completion was approximately 26 months countrywide. The SEAI has advised me that wait times vary, based on the demand for the scheme at the time of application as well as other factors including the scale of works to be completed, access to the property, availability of materials and the weather. The average wait times have increased significantly in 2021 due to the extensive COVID-19 related restrictions on construction activity in place between January and mid-April when the scheme was fully paused in line with Government guidelines. Wait times have also been negatively impacted by challenges associated with availability and longer lead times for materials.

Funding for SEAI energy poverty retrofit schemes has increased significantly to over €109 million in 2021, with €100 million allocated to the Warmer Homes Scheme. This is an increase of €47 million on the 2020 allocation and means that almost half of the total SEAI residential and community retrofit budget will support people vulnerable to energy poverty. The funding will mean that more households can receive free energy efficiency upgrades making their homes warmer, healthier and cheaper to run, in line with the Programme for Government. I have also secured additional resources this year to expand the capacity of the SEAI to deliver the scheme. In addition, delivery capacity in the supply chain has increased due to a new, broader contractor panel that commenced at the end of 2020. Every effort is being made to maximise output now that construction activity in the residential sector has recommenced.

### **National Broadband Plan**

14. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the reason a property (details supplied) cannot avail of high-speed broadband; when this area is due to be surveyed; the way his Department plans to address this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45404/21]

**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. 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. 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.

Kilmurry National School forms part of this initiative and has already been surveyed by National Broadband Ireland (NBI). NBI has informed my Department that a wireless solution has been proposed and installation will commence shortly. The Department of Education are aware of this development.

### **Departmental Schemes**

15. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if his attention has been drawn to the fact that concerns that proposed changes to the requirements of the better energy communities scheme in order that a number of residential housing be incorporated in all applications could hamper commercial, public sector, voluntary and community-based organisations from successfully applying; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45652/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Communities Energy Grant (CEG) Scheme which is funded by the Department and operated by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI), makes grant funding available for community-based partnerships to improve the energy efficiency of the building stock in their area.

The objective of the CEG Scheme is to support cross-sectoral, partnership approaches that deliver energy savings to a range of building types including public, commercial and community buildings with a particular focus on using the projects to deliver home retrofits.

The requirement for a small number of homes to be incorporated in all CEG applications is included in the context of the ambitious home retrofit targets set out in the Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan. These targets include the retrofit of 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2/cost optimal and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings over the next 10 years. Homes are a core element of every community so it is entirely reasonable that they be included in applications for grant support under the CEG scheme. Indeed, the scheme requires a minimum of just one home to be included in applications for it to be deemed in line with the relevant criteria.

The 2021 budget for the scheme is €30 million, a €10 million increase on the allocation in 2020. This is in the context of an overall budget of €221.5 million for SEAI residential and community grant schemes this year.

It is noteworthy that demand for the scheme under the existing guidelines has been very strong - applications with a value in excess of €30 million have been received by SEAI under the most recent call for projects. This indicates that the requirement for homes to be included in projects has not impacted negatively on uptake.

I am advised that the SEAI is willing to work with organisations to help enable the inclusion of homes in applications.

### **Cybersecurity Policy**

16. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department's IT infrastructure is monitored for security breaches on a 24/7 basis; the guidance provided from Government on same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45321/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department takes the security of its

Information Technology infrastructure very seriously. IT infrastructure monitoring is one aspect of the security measures my Department has in place to address IT security issues and our technical staff monitor all relevant systems to the highest levels. Guidance, where available, from the Office of the Government's Chief Information Officer and the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) is regularly reviewed, considered and implemented where appropriate.

For operational and security reasons, however, it would not be appropriate to disclose specific details of systems and processes which could in any way compromise those efforts, or which might inadvertently assist criminals to identify potential vulnerabilities in my Department's IT security arrangements.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

17. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Transport the steps taken by his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within his Department who have access to cloud services for remote video-conferencing and the capacity to work remotely; his plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45377/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department is currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. With restrictions now lifting, extensive plans are being implemented to enable staff to transition gradually and safely to the shared workplace while maintaining an element of working from home, until a blended working scheme is formally in place.

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform are in consultation with Staff Representative Unions to agree a central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service. It is anticipated this will be finalised in the coming months. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific business requirements my Department.

My Department has robustly facilitated remote working for staff in roles across all office locations, where feasible, since March 2020. Given the remit of my Department, there was a conscious effort to minimise the pressure on the public transport system to support essential workers travelling safely throughout the pandemic restrictions. This has included the supply of IT and office equipment to enable an effective and productive working environment at home for our people. All staff who need it to perform work duties have access to cloud services for remote video-conferencing.

My Department has arrangements in place with suppliers via frameworks available under the Office of Government Procurement for the provision of Video Conference licensing, mobile hardware and peripherals to enable staff to continue to work remotely as required.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

18. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Transport the steps taken by agencies under the remit of his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within these agencies who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; if there are plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which pro-

curement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45394/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** While I have referred your question to the agencies under the aegis of my Department for direct answer, I can advise that the Programme for Government seeks to deliver a better life for all and the Government is committed to facilitating and supporting remote working.

The objective of the National Remote Work Strategy “Making Remote Work” is to ensure that remote working is a permanent feature in the Irish workplace in a way that maximises economic, social and environmental benefits.

Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply from the agencies within 10 working days.

### **Driver Test**

19. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Transport if a driving test can be expedited for a person (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45526/21]

**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 an operational matter for the RSA and I do not have any role in this process. This question is therefore being referred to the Authority for direct reply.

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

### **Driver Licences**

20. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Transport if a refund for a replacement driving licence can be issued to a person (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45527/21]

**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 (NDLS), the provision of which I have delegated to the Road Safety Authority (RSA) under the relevant legislation. My Department does not have access to individual applications.

A driving licence cannot be renewed more than 3 months before the date of expiry of a licence. The licensing system, both online and in person, does not allow for a renewal application to be accepted outside that timeframe. If an incorrect application type was made, such as requesting a replacement licence, and the replacement licence was issued, a refund would not be applicable as the service paid for has been provided.

### **Driver Test**

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

matter. [45528/21]

**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 an operational matter for the RSA and I do not have any role in this process. This question is therefore being referred to the Authority for direct reply.

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

### **Tax Reliefs**

22. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport the discussions that have taken place to date between the NTA and his Department in relation to additional supports and changes to the tax saver scheme that will acknowledge the change in working patterns and the significant impact the pandemic has had on ticket holders and monies spent to date and impending charges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45663/21]

**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 has commenced discussions with the NTA and the Department of Finance on the matter. 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.

### **Driver Test**

23. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Transport when a person (details supplied) will receive a date for a driving test; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45735/21]

**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 an operational matter for the RSA and I do not have any role in this process. This question is therefore being referred to the Authority for direct reply.

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

### **Driver Test**

24. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Transport if there are contingency plans being put in place to deal with the backlog of driver theory test and full driving test applications in County Wicklow; if additional staff have been put in place in the county to deal with this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45736/21]

**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 and Theory Test.

Specific details relating to County Wicklow are held by the Road Safety Authority. This part of the 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.

Due to the suspension of driver testing services in the initial pandemic response, along with the health protocols required since the resumption of services, services are operating well below normal capacity and a significant backlog has developed.

In line with the gradual reopening of services this Summer, driving tests for all those who are eligible to take the test and have been waiting longest have now recommenced. Critical frontline workers continue to be the prioritised.

My Department is liaising with the RSA on an ongoing basis to meet the growing demand for tests. An additional 40 temporary driver testers have been authorised along with 36 approved for retention or rehire in 2020. In addition, sanction was granted at the end of June to add a further 40 testers to the cohort.

The RSA is looking to increase the number of tests from 6 to 7 per tester per day from the end of September as well as extending operating hours and expanding facilities at existing centres or opening new centres where appropriate.

The gradual re-opening of in-person driver theory test centres commenced on 8th of June. The Road Safety Authority (RSA) reopened test centres and introduced capacity to increase the number of tests from an average of 15,000 tests (in normal times) to 25,000 tests monthly, to tackle the backlog and shorten waiting times.

The gradual re-opening of in-person driver theory test centres commenced on 8th of June. The Road Safety Authority (RSA) reopened test centres and introduced capacity to increase the number of tests from an average of 15,000 tests (in normal times) to over 25,000 tests monthly. Almost 50,000 tests were provided during the month of August.

The test centres have extensive COVID-19 measures in place to protect both customers and staff and to ensure the safe delivery of the service.

The RSA has been working to expand the online theory test service. The new offering will see up to 10,000 online theory tests available for all categories of vehicles per month. Tests are available on a first-come-first-served basis with the new online service becoming more widely available later in the year.

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

## **Driver Test**

25. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Transport the number of persons on a waiting list for a driving test by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45741/21]

**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.

### **Tax Avoidance**

26. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Finance his views on whether Ireland's tax system is consistent with Ireland's stated commitment to equitable development and working with poorer countries to move beyond a reliance on aid given the recent revelations by an organisation (details supplied) regarding the tax avoidance activities of a company which show definitively that taxable profits are being siphoned from poorer countries such as Nepal and Ethiopia; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45726/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am aware of recent media report regarding a publication concerning the tax arrangements of an individual taxpayer. From the outset, I must state that it is not appropriate for the Minister for Finance to comment on the tax affairs of individual businesses.

I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that Revenue uses a range of resources to identify instances of tax avoidance, which would include tax avoidance arising from the arrangements described in the Agreement between the Competent Authorities of Ireland and Malta.

Those arrangements involved an exploitation of a mismatch of Irish and Maltese rules in relation to company residence and domicile, which could have led to income falling out of charge in Ireland and in Malta, resulting in double *non-taxation* of the income concerned. I cannot comment on the arrangements of any specific taxpayer. However, arrangements as described in the Christian Aid report are not arrangements that involve a mismatch of residence and domicile rules that would lead to double non-taxation, through amounts falling out of charge in both Ireland in Malta.

The purpose of the Ireland-Malta Competent Authority Agreement was to deter the arrangements described in the Agreement. The Christian Aid report appears to confirm that the Agreement was effective in achieving that purpose— and I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that they have not identified information that would suggest otherwise. As regards those arrangements or any other aggressive tax planning, I have repeatedly stated that I will not hesitate to propose legislation to address tax avoidance, where it may not be possible to address arrangements within the existing code. The Revenue Commissioners liaise with my Department on that basis, in relation to potential loopholes they identify.

The Revenue Commissioners cannot comment directly or indirectly on the arrangements of a specific taxpayer. I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners – as a general statement and without their reference to, or implication in respect of, any specific case – that they do not

provide confirmations or opinions to taxpayers on matters in respect of which they suspect there may be a tax avoidance purpose.

Revenue is strongly committed to identifying and challenging tax avoidance, including schemes that would seek to rely on Ireland's Double Taxation Agreements. Revenue has reviewed Ireland's Double Taxation Agreement (DTA) network in relation to the possibility of arrangements, similar to those addressed by the Ireland-Malta Competent Authority Agreement, being implemented using a different DTA. Specifically, Revenue has considered Ireland's DTA with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which has been cited in that regard.

I am further informed by the Revenue Commissioners that, in the absence of a generally-applicable corporate tax in the UAE, the UAE DTA contains provisions designed to prevent companies from qualifying as residents of the UAE for the purposes of the DTA. While Revenue will remain vigilant for indications of avoidance, they consider that DTA has been designed to prevent such possible use and that the risk of implementation of arrangements, similar to those addressed in the Competent Authority Agreement with Malta, is low in relation to the UAE DTA and other DTAs designed for restricted application.

For my part, I have repeatedly demonstrated that I am committed to taking action to ensure the Irish tax code is in line with new and emerging international tax standards as agreed globally. The January 2021 Update to Ireland's Corporation Tax Roadmap highlights the actions that have already been taken and will continue to be taken in this process of corporation tax reform.

In this vein, it is important to remember that in recent Finance Acts, the Oireachtas has;

- substantially progressed transposition of the Anti-Tax Avoidance Directives through the introduction of Controlled Foreign Company rules, and anti-hybrid rules;

- introduced defensive measures against listed jurisdictions through enhanced Controlled Foreign Company Rules;

- updated transfer pricing rules;

- introduced legislation for OECD BEPS measures on mandatory disclosure rules; and

- substantially widened the scope of the Exit Tax regime — with the result that, on the migration of a company from Ireland to another country of residence, the increase in the value of assets to the date of the company's departure will be chargeable to Irish tax.

It should also be recognised that Ireland has a longstanding General Anti-Avoidance Rule, which goes beyond the standard required in the EU Anti-Tax Avoidance Directives.

Further, in the upcoming Finance Bill, it is intended that we will complete the transposition of the Anti-Tax Avoidance Directives, with the introduction of interest limitation rules and anti-reverse hybrid rules. It is intended that these rules will take effect from 1 January 2022.

This reform is not complete: As set out in the update to the Corporation Tax Roadmap, over the coming years there are commitments to introduce a series of measures to further reform our corporate tax code, including through the introduction of measures to apply to outbound payments, further action against listed jurisdictions, as well as publishing a tax treaty policy statement with a particular focus on developing countries.

## **Tax Data**

27. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated revenue generated in each of the years 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025 that were the capital allowances claimed against intangible assets onshored between 2015 and 11 October 2017 capped at the current rate of 80%; and the estimated quantum of capital allowances remaining to be claimed against those assets. [45282/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The 80% cap on capital allowances for intangible assets was re-introduced in Finance Act 2017 and it applies to all intangible assets on-shored from 11 October 2017. The cap only affects the timing of relief in the form of capital allowances and related interest expenses for intangible assets and does not affect the overall quantum of relief. This is because any amounts restricted in one accounting period (resulting from the cap) would be available for carry forward to a subsequent accounting period, subject to the application of the cap in that period.

I am advised by Revenue that Corporation Tax returns do not record the on-shoring of intangible assets (or the year in which on-shoring occurred). The available information is the amounts of capital allowances claimed in respect of intangible assets.

A tentative estimate of the potential short-term cash-flow benefit that could accrue if intangible assets on-shored between 2015 and 11 October 2017 were subject to the 80% cap has been provided on previous occasions. However, as Revenue anticipate that many of the claims associated with the period 2015 to 2017 are likely to be finishing due to the write down periods for these assets, it is likely that the impact of the suggested cap in the requested years would not be significant. An estimate of allowances remaining to be claimed is not available.

### Cybersecurity Policy

28. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department's IT infrastructure is monitored for security breaches on a 24/7 basis; the guidance provided from Government on same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45310/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I wish to confirm to the Deputy that my Department's IT Infrastructure has a breadth of infrastructure monitoring in place and provides a 24/7 service, however 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.

Guidance from Government in relation to ICT security is a matter for the National Cyber Security Centre.

### Tax Code

29. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Finance the annual estimated cost of reducing VAT on domestic electricity bills by 1%; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45325/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that a tentative estimate on the cost of reducing VAT on residential electricity supply based on the current Ready Reckoner would be in the region of €20m.

## **Tax Yield**

30. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Finance the amount of VAT collected on domestic electricity in 2019 and 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45326/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that it's not possible to obtain an exact figure for VAT raised from electricity as traders are not required to identify specific activities on their VAT returns.

However, they do compile estimates based on the most recently available CSO / SEAI data.

Below are estimates for the VAT yield for 2019 and 2020;

2019 - 224 (€m estimate)

2020 – 228 (€m estimate)

## **Flexible Work Practices**

31. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Finance the steps taken by his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within his Department who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; his plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45367/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I wish to indicate to the Deputy that 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. It is expected that this will be finalised in conjunction with employee representative bodies 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. Furthermore, my 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 ICT services of the Department are provided by the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO) for all staff. These services support remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely. The ICT equipment procured for staff to work remotely has been procured in line with the appropriate procurement guidelines.

In excess of 93% of staff are enabled to work from home. Those who are not enabled to work from home have continued to work on-site over the last 18 months. With regards to these members of staff, it should be mentioned that their onsite presence is required due to the nature of their work.

## **Flexible Work Practices**

32. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Finance the steps taken by agencies under the remit of his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within these agencies who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; if there are plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45384/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The following is the position in relation to those bodies under the aegis of my Department that have employees:

The Central Bank of Ireland, which also provides staffing and facilities for the Investor Compensation Company DAC, is continuing to evolve its ways of working so that it is a fulfilling workplace for its staff and an effective organisation that can deliver on its mandate in the public interest. Its people and systems have adapted well to the remote environment during which the vast majority of staff worked from home in line with public health guidelines. As public health guidelines change, more staff will begin returning to the office on a phased and limited basis. The Bank's staff are well-equipped to work remotely, with the vast majority using videoconferencing, collaboration software and other services remotely, as such the Bank has no requirement to increase the participation in these services at this time. Some staff, due to the nature of their work, will need to be onsite e.g. security and catering. It is envisaged that the majority of staff will work in a hybrid model in the future.

The Credit Review Office has two members of staff, both of whom have been working remotely since March 2020.

The Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO) has, since March 2020, taken measures to facilitate remote working in order to comply with public health measures in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, the FSPO has ensured the continuity of its operations by facilitating remote working for the majority of its staff, with only a small number of roles requiring office attendance for essential business needs to ensure it continues to fulfil its statutory role and meet the needs of its customers. All FSPO staff, including new employees, have access to the necessary IT equipment, cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely. For this reason, it is not envisaged that any further procurement is required by the FSPO in order to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work. All decisions in relation to future working arrangements for the FSPO will be taken in the context of public health guidance, guidance from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, business needs and staff welfare.

All staff of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council have been working remotely since March 2020 and have the capacity and necessary resources, including cloud services, to work remotely and it is planned to continue to maintain this. The Council has a remote working policy in place with a hybrid-model applying on a physical return to the office. A Procurement Policy is in place which aims to ensure that the Fiscal Council, relative to the nature and volume of procurement undertaken, complies with its legal obligations, and procures openly, objectively, and transparently to get the best value for money in line with the Guidelines of the Office of Government Procurement.

Employees of the Office of the Comptroller & Auditor General 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 — the move to blended working supports commitments in the national remote working strategy. 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. All staff of the Office have access to teleconferencing facilities and access to other platforms is arranged as required on a case by case basis. 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.

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, approximately 95% of staff, worked from home. It is the NTMA's expectation that a hybrid working model will be available to all employees and the NTMA Remote Working Guide will be updated to reflect this. The NTMA has the IT infrastructure in place to facilitate staff working remotely. This infrastructure has been procured in line with the NTMA Procurement Policy.

The NTMA assigns staff to Home Building Finance Ireland, the National Asset Management Agency and the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland.

The Office of the Revenue Commissioners is actively developing its blended working policy in response to the Making Remote Work strategy. Revenue already has the technology in place to support remote working for all staff, noting that some staff such as Customs Officers cannot work remotely. Revenue currently supports approximately 4,500 remote workers on a daily basis. Video conferencing facilities are available to all staff including all remote workers and this service operates in the cloud. This technology was procured pre-Covid-19 via a tender for Revenue's Office productivity suite.

The Tax Appeals Commission (TAC) has drafted a remote working policy for its staff members and is currently awaiting final guidelines and direction from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform before implementation takes place. To date, no staff member has requested remote working on a permanent or hybrid-basis but the Commission conducted an internal anonymous survey in May 2021 which indicated a level of interest in some form of hybrid working. From 20 September 2021, in accordance with Government recommendations, staff physically returned to the office on a staggered basis. To maintain social distancing, the overall daily number of staff attending the office is limited and this will be an excellent pilot for hybrid working post pandemic. The ICT services of the Commission are provided by the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer which already supports remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely.

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

33. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance the status of the temporary wage subsidy scheme, employment wage subsidy scheme and Covid restrictions scheme compliances programmes respectively; the percentage of employers availing of each scheme who have been contacted by the Revenue Commissioners regarding repayments; the total amount of repayments due from employers under each scheme; the total amount collected to date in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45440/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The temporary wage subsidy scheme (TWSS) closed at the end of August 2020, and I am advised that Revenue has been carrying out

a programme of compliance checks on all employers who participated in the TWSS scheme to confirm eligibility and that the supports were properly paid out to qualifying employees. Revenue has confirmed that to date, compliance checks have been completed in respect of 64,710 employers, representing more than 99.6% of cases, with the remainder in progress. I am further advised by Revenue that the compliance checks have shown significantly high levels of compliance with the TWSS requirements by employers with 1,523 employers, approximately 2% of cases, having to repay the TWSS subsidy as they failed to meet the requirements of the scheme. Settlements in these cases totalled €27.7m.

Following a reconciliation exercise conducted at the end of June 2021 in respect of 67,525 employer registrations the overall TWSS liability due is €309m. There is €79.5m currently outstanding with approximately €63.5m of that amount included in the debt warehouse.

In relation to the employment wage subsidy scheme (EWSS), I am advised that Revenue is undertaking a compliance programme which to date has seen 7,223 employers availing of EWSS contacted, or 14% of the 51,450 employers who registered for the scheme. Of these, 2,584 were Revenue initiated contacts, and 4,639 were voluntary amendments made by employers where they were liable to repay EWSS subsidies to Revenue. The total amount collected to date is €50m with an amount of €7.3m remaining due to be collected. €6.4m of the outstanding amount is included in the debt warehouse.

The Covid restriction support scheme (CRSS) is a scheme designed to provide targeted support for businesses significantly impacted by restrictions introduced to combat the effect of the pandemic. I am advised that the compliance approach by Revenue is primarily focused on eligibility confirmation at application, with ongoing monitoring of claimants as sectoral restrictions change.

## Tax Reliefs

34. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will prioritise the inclusion of lithium battery plant machinery on the triple E register to avail of accelerated capital allowance; his views on the advantages of promoting this technology; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45460/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Finance Act 2008 introduced the Accelerated Capital Allowance (ACA) scheme for Energy Efficient Equipment (EEE). The scheme provides a tax incentive for companies and sole traders who invest in highly EEE. The ACA scheme allows taxpayers to deduct the full cost of expenditure on eligible equipment from taxable profits in the year of purchase. This differs to the standard treatment of capital allowances which are claimed at a rate of 12.5% annually over eight years.

To qualify for the scheme, equipment must fall within one of the 10 classes of technology specified in Schedule 4A of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997. In order for equipment in these classes of technology to qualify for the scheme it must also meet detailed energy efficiency criteria as set in statutory instrument by the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications with the approval of, and after consultation with, the Minister for Finance. A statutory instrument is also required to update such criteria. The SEAI maintains the listing of eligible products on its Triple E Register, and plays a key role in the process for setting the eligibility criteria by undertaken periodic technical reviews of the technology groups.

Last year my officials, in conjunction with officials in the Department for the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC), the SEAI and the Revenue Commissioners, completed

a Tax Expenditure Review of the scheme in accordance with the Department of Finance guidelines for evaluating tax expenditures. This review established that the policy objective of the scheme remains valid and provided evidence of increased uptake of the relief, particularly among micro and small businesses in recent years. Finance Act 2020 extended the end date of the scheme from 31 December 2020 to 31 December 2023. The review also recommended the classes of technology included in Schedule 4A and the existing energy efficiency qualifying criteria be reviewed with a view to updating the criteria to reflect technological advances in energy efficiency.

I am informed by the SEAI that it is possible that the types of machinery referred to by the Deputy may qualify for the scheme under the technology group ‘Electrical Vehicles and Associated Charging Equipment’, which is included in the Class of Technology ‘Electric and Alternative Fuel Vehicles’ in Schedule 4A. Whether or not a specific item of machinery qualifies for the scheme depends on whether it meets the qualifying criteria set for that technology group. If a taxpayer wishes to confirm whether an item of equipment qualifies for the scheme they may consult the SEAI at the following email address: TripleE@seai.ie or (01) 808 2100. Information on the ACA scheme can be found on the SEAI website through [www.seai.ie/business-and-public-sector/business-grants-and-supports/accelerated-capital-allowance/](http://www.seai.ie/business-and-public-sector/business-grants-and-supports/accelerated-capital-allowance/).

The SEAI is the body responsible for setting the eligibility criteria and maintaining the register of eligible products for which the incentive can be claimed. The SEAI is currently undertaking a technical review of the scheme which includes the detailed energy efficiency criteria equipment must meet to qualify for the scheme. I am informed by my colleagues in DECC that the SEAI intend on engaging with industry stakeholders in the coming period during the review process. Through this process stakeholders will have an opportunity to make representations relating to the existing technology groups and propose new technologies.

## **Tax Reliefs**

35. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the total cost to the Exchequer of tax relief on pensions contributions from 2016 to 2020 disaggregated by year and pension type in tabular form. [45649/21]

36. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the total cost to the Exchequer of tax relief on pension contributions from 2016 to 2020 disaggregated by year and salary band with intervals of €10,000 in tabular form. [45650/21]

37. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the number of persons availing of tax relief on pension contributions from 2016 to 2020 disaggregated by year and salary band with intervals of €10,000 in tabular form. [45651/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 35 to 37, inclusive, together.

I am advised by Revenue that the cost of tax relief on pension contributions for the years 2004 to 2018 (the latest year currently available) are available on the Revenue website at [www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/tax-expenditures/costs-tax-expenditures.pdf](http://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/tax-expenditures/costs-tax-expenditures.pdf).

For 2018 the published items in relation to pension contribution relief are:

- ‘Employees’ Contributions to Approved Superannuation Schemes’,
- ‘Employers’ Contributions to Approved Superannuation Schemes’,

- ‘Exemption of Employers’ Contributions to BIK’, and
- ‘Pension Contributions (Retirement Annuity and PRSA)’

For the convenience of the Deputy, the following table sets out the relevant tax costs for the years 2016-2018 as figures for 2019 and 2020 are not yet available.

Tax Relief	2018	2018	2017	2017	2016	2016
	Cost €m	Number of taxpayers	Cost €m	Number of taxpayers	Cost €m	Number of taxpayers
Employees’ Contributions to Approved Superannuation Schemes	677.7	663,900	598.1	614,200	582.4	599,200
Employers’ Contributions to Approved Superannuation Schemes’	173.2	413,000	159.8	366,700	158.4	345,500
Exemption of Employers’ Contributions to BIK	658.3	413,000	607.3	366,700	601.9	345,500
Pension Contributions (Retirement Annuity and PRSA)	241.3	98,300	229.3	93,600	221.3	95,900
Total Cost	€1,750.5m		€1,594.5m		€1,563.7m	

In relation to the Deputy’s question regarding the total cost to Exchequer of tax relief on pension contributions and the number of persons availing of this relief from 2016 to 2020, disaggregated by year and salary band, I am advised by Revenue that prior to the introduction of real-time reporting (PAYE Modernisation) on 1 January 2019, pension contributions were reported to Revenue at an employer level rather than an employee level, and therefore the breakdown requested by the Deputy is not available for years prior to 2019.

The Deputy may be interested in Revenue’s paper on ‘Statistics and Insights from the First Year of Real-Time Payroll Reporting (PAYE Modernisation)’ which is available at [www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/research/pmod-statistics-paper.pdf](http://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/research/pmod-statistics-paper.pdf). In this paper, on page 17, a breakdown is provided of the level of pension contributions through payroll, as well as the number of individuals, broken down by income band for the year 2019.

I am advised by Revenue that a broad indication of the tax cost by income band may be inferred from this table in relation to employees. However, comparable information for employees and self-assessed cases combined is not available. Data from tax returns (PAYE and self-assessed individuals) for the year 2019 are currently being processed and will be available in the coming months.

*Question No. 36 answered with Question No. 35.*

*Question No. 37 answered with Question No. 35.*

### Tax Reliefs

38. **Deputy Fergus O’Dowd** asked the Minister for Finance the discussions that have taken place to date between the NTA and his Department in relation to additional supports and changes to the tax saver scheme that will acknowledge the change in working patterns and the significant impact the pandemic has had on ticket holders and monies spent to date and impending charges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45664/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Section 118(5A) of the Taxes Consoli-

dation Act (TCA 1997) provides an exemption from benefit-in-kind (BIK) where an employer purchases a travel pass for an employee.

Under section 118B TCA 1997 an employer and employee may also enter into a salary sacrifice arrangement under which the employee agrees to sacrifice part of his or her salary, in exchange for a travel pass.

Where a travel pass is purchased under the BIK scheme or through a salary sacrifice arrangement certain conditions must be met, for example:

- the cost incurred must relate to a monthly or annual bus, railway or ferry travel pass;
- the travel pass must be issued by or on behalf of one or more approved transport providers; and
- the approved transport provider must be contracted or licensed to provide the transport services covered by the travel pass.

The terms 'monthly' and 'annual' above refer to the period of time for which the travel pass is valid for use, being a period of 30/31 or 365/366 days respectively. The number of journeys or extent of travel which may be undertaken within the monthly or annual period covered by the travel pass will depend on the terms and conditions of the specific ticket purchased and the relevant transport provider.

Further details on the tax treatment applicable on the provision of a travel pass to an employee can be found on Revenue's website.

As the Deputy will be aware, it is a longstanding practice of the Minister for Finance not to comment, in advance of the Budget, on any tax matters that might be the subject of Budget decisions.

### **Tax Avoidance**

39. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to any company, other than a company (details supplied) that is using an equivalent of the so-called single malt tax avoidance structure to reduce their tax liability as recently revealed by an organisation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45722/21]

40. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Finance if a company (details supplied) received any assurances on the operation of the single malt-type structure from the Revenue Commissioners; if his attention or that of his officials was drawn to any other company still using a single malt or equivalent tax avoidance structure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45723/21]

41. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department has undertaken any assessment or analysis of Irish-registered companies' tax-resident in Malta for tax purposes since the signing of the Ireland-Malta Competent Authority Agreement in 2018; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45724/21]

42. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department has carried out any assessment or analysis of Irish-registered companies' tax-resident in tax treaty partner countries other than Malta for tax purposes, since the residency rule changes in the Finance Act 2014 came into force on 31 December 2020 ending the tax avoidance structure known as double Irish; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45725/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 39 to 42, inclusive, together.

I am aware of recent media report regarding a publication concerning the tax arrangements of an individual taxpayer. From the outset, I must state that it is not appropriate for the Minister for Finance to comment on the tax affairs of individual businesses.

I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that Revenue uses a range of resources to identify instances of tax avoidance, which would include tax avoidance arising from the arrangements described in the Agreement between the Competent Authorities of Ireland and Malta.

Those arrangements involved an exploitation of a mismatch of Irish and Maltese rules in relation to company residence and domicile, which could have led to income falling out of charge in Ireland and in Malta, resulting in double *non-taxation* of the income concerned. I cannot comment on the arrangements of any specific taxpayer. However, arrangements as described in the Christian Aid report are not arrangements that involve a mismatch of residence and domicile rules that would lead to double non-taxation, through amounts falling out of charge in both Ireland in Malta.

The purpose of the Ireland-Malta Competent Authority Agreement was to deter the arrangements described in the Agreement. The Christian Aid report appears to confirm that the Agreement was effective in achieving that purpose— and I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that they have not identified information that would suggest otherwise. As regards those arrangements or any other aggressive tax planning, I have repeatedly stated that I will not hesitate to propose legislation to address tax avoidance, where it may not be possible to address arrangements within the existing code. The Revenue Commissioners liaise with my Department on that basis, in relation to potential loopholes they identify.

The Revenue Commissioners cannot comment directly or indirectly on the arrangements of a specific taxpayer. I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners – as a general statement and without their reference to, or implication in respect of, any specific case – that they do not provide confirmations or opinions to taxpayers on matters in respect of which they suspect there may be a tax avoidance purpose.

Revenue is strongly committed to identifying and challenging tax avoidance, including schemes that would seek to rely on Ireland's Double Taxation Agreements. Revenue has reviewed Ireland's Double Taxation Agreement (DTA) network in relation to the possibility of arrangements, similar to those addressed by the Ireland-Malta Competent Authority Agreement, being implemented using a different DTA. Specifically, Revenue has considered Ireland's DTA with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which has been cited in that regard.

I am further informed by the Revenue Commissioners that, in the absence of a generally-applicable corporate tax in the UAE, the UAE DTA contains provisions designed to prevent companies from qualifying as residents of the UAE for the purposes of the DTA. While Revenue will remain vigilant for indications of avoidance, they consider that DTA has been designed to prevent such possible use and that the risk of implementation of arrangements, similar to those addressed in the Competent Authority Agreement with Malta, is low in relation to the UAE DTA and other DTAs designed for restricted application.

For my part, I have repeatedly demonstrated that I am committed to taking action to ensure the Irish tax code is in line with new and emerging international tax standards as agreed globally. The January 2021 Update to Ireland's Corporation Tax Roadmap highlights the actions that have already been taken and will continue to be taken in this process of corporation tax reform.

In this vein, it is important to remember that in recent Finance Acts, the Oireachtas has;

- substantially progressed transposition of the Anti-Tax Avoidance Directives through the introduction of Controlled Foreign Company rules, and anti-hybrid rules;

- introduced defensive measures against listed jurisdictions through enhanced Controlled Foreign Company Rules;

- updated transfer pricing rules;

- introduced legislation for OECD BEPS measures on mandatory disclosure rules; and

- substantially widened the scope of the Exit Tax regime — with the result that, on the migration of a company from Ireland to another country of residence, the increase in the value of assets to the date of the company's departure will be chargeable to Irish tax.

It should also be recognised that Ireland has a longstanding General Anti-Avoidance Rule, which goes beyond the standard required in the EU Anti-Tax Avoidance Directives.

Further, in the upcoming Finance Bill, it is intended that we will complete the transposition of the Anti-Tax Avoidance Directives, with the introduction of interest limitation rules and anti-reverse hybrid rules. It is intended that these rules will take effect from 1 January 2022.

This reform is not complete: As set out in the update to the Corporation Tax Roadmap, over the coming years there are commitments to introduce a series of measures to further reform our corporate tax code, including through the introduction of measures to apply to outbound payments, further action against listed jurisdictions, as well as publishing a tax treaty policy statement with a particular focus on developing countries.

*Question No. 40 answered with Question No. 39.*

*Question No. 41 answered with Question No. 39.*

*Question No. 42 answered with Question No. 39.*

## **Tax Data**

43. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Finance the number of properties in which the PPSN of the tenant has been allocated to the property for the purposes of local property tax by county in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [45740/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Section 11 of the Finance (Local Property Tax) Act 2012 (as amended) sets out the rules used to determine the 'liable person' of a residential property for LPT purposes. Generally, the 'liable person' is the owner of the residential property on the basis that he or she has the right to immediate possession or is entitled to receive the rent where occupied by a tenant. However, the legislation also provides that a tenant is liable for LPT on a residential property where the lease is for a period of 20 years or more. Local Authorities or Approved Housing Bodies are liable for LPT in cases where a tenant is renting a residential property from them.

When LPT was introduced in 2013 Revenue produced the first residential property register of all properties within the State. As the data to compile the Register was gathered from various sources, a relatively small number of tenants were incorrectly linked as 'liable persons' to the properties they were renting. In such circumstances, the tenants were requested to contact

Revenue to confirm they were not the 'liable person' and to provide details of the landlord. If information regarding the landlord was not available to them, they were requested to provide the details of the person to whom they paid the rent. Once the position of a tenant was confirmed, Revenue amended to Register to reflect the correct 'liable person'.

I am advised by Revenue that it is not possible to provide the information requested by the Deputy, as there is no requirement for 'liable persons' to advise that they are a tenant when meeting their LPT obligations. The only requirement is to confirm that they are the correct 'liable person' for the property. If the Deputy is aware of any tenant who is incorrectly linked as the 'liable person' to a residential property, she should advise him or her to contact the LPT Helpline at 01-738362 to have the matter reviewed and rectified.

### **Cybersecurity Policy**

44. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his Department's IT infrastructure is monitored for security breaches on a 24/7 basis; the guidance provided from Government on same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45316/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I can confirm that my Department's IT Infrastructure has a breadth of infrastructure monitoring in place and provide a 24/7 service, however 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.

Guidance from Government in relation to ICT security is a matter for the National Cyber Security Centre.

### **Public Procurement Contracts**

45. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the process underway by the Office of Government Procurement in relation to a possible new framework for the procurement of cloud video conference services; if the intention of the framework is to ensure fair competition across collaboration and video conferencing providers; if the Office of Government Procurement plans to consult with prospective service providers; the timeline for this consultation; the expected date for the publication of this framework; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45352/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** OGP is engaging with its client base in relation to their requirements for cloud services (including collaboration and video conference services) which will inform OGP's future strategy in relation to potential procurement solutions for cloud services. Any procurement of cloud services will be through public competition advertised on [www.etender.ie](http://www.etender.ie). Pre-market engagement relating to any public procurement competition will be conducted in an open and transparent manner through a Request for Information process advertised on [www.etenders.ie](http://www.etenders.ie). It is recommended that all potential suppliers interested in tendering for OGP solutions register on [www.etenders.ie](http://www.etenders.ie). The timeline for any pre-market engagement and/or public procurement process will be determined by the outcome of OGP's client engagement.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

46. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the steps taken by his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within his Department who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; his plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45373/21]

47. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the steps taken by agencies under the remit of his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within these agencies who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; if there are plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45390/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 46 and 47 together.

I wish to advise the Deputy that a central policy framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service will be finalised in conjunction with employee representatives over the coming months, for implementation in Q1 2022. This framework will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Government Department/Office, including my own Department, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

All staff in my Department and the Office of Government Procurement (OGP), which is also part of the Department, are enabled to work from home. All of these staff have access to our Government hosted video conferencing services and can also access cloud hosted video conferencing services. In addition, in the order of 35% of staff have an additional licence for the purpose of organising cloud hosted video conferences. My Department utilises OGP frameworks, where available, for the procurement of laptops and other computer equipment and services, etc. Licences for the cloud hosted video conference service were procured nationally.

The position in relation to the bodies under the aegis of my Department is set out in the table below.

Public Body	Percentage of staff working from home and with access to video conferencing capacity	Framework under which procurement for remote working/video conferencing licences were managed
Office of Public Works (OPW)	77% The majority of the remaining OPW staff work primarily outdoors, with no office based activities e.g. drivers, craftsmen, general operatives etc.	OPW uses OGP frameworks laptops and other computer equipment and services. Cloud-based video conferencing services were procured through open tender competition on eTenders.gov.ie Website and OJEU.
National Shared Services Office (NSSO)	100%	OGP Managed Frameworks - Laptops, Citrix, MS Teams, Skype for Business-WeBex – 3 quotes satisfied requirements due to small number of licences required (WeBex Training and WeBex Events)
Public Appointments Service (PAS)	100%	Microsoft Licensing Services (Cloud based Videoconferencing – Microsoft Teams) Personal & Notebook Computers and Associated Services (laptops for staff)
State Laboratory	100%	No additional procurement requirements
Office of the Ombudsman	100%	All required hardware and software required to facilitate this are procured from OGP frameworks.

Public Body	Percentage of staff working from home and with access to video conferencing capacity	Framework under which procurement for remote working/video conferencing licences were managed
Office of the National Lottery Regulator (ORNL)	100%	Upgrade to ICT system completed in February 2020 via eTenders. Adjustments to tender requirements were made, in compliance with OGP guidelines, e.g. to substitute desktop PCs with laptops and ancillary equipment to facilitate remote dial-in. Some items noted above are small-value projects that did not meet value criteria of OGP frameworks.

*Question No. 47 answered with Question No. 46.*

### Ministerial Appointments

48. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he is satisfied with the process of Government appointments in view of recent events; and his views on whether the Public Service Management (Recruitment and Appointment) Act 2004 needs to be amended in this regard. [45439/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The Public Service Management (Recruitment and Appointments) Act 2004 sets out procedures relating to the recruitment and appointments for the civil service and certain other bodies in the public service.

However as Minister for Public Expenditure & Reform, I have responsibility under these acts for recruitment to the Civil Service only as set out by Section 58(1)(a) of the 2004 Act.

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

PAS continues to apply the standards of probity, merit, equity and fairness, consistent with the codes of practice set down by the Commission. The codes of practice are followed by PAS in the public interest for the recruitment, assessment and selection of persons for appointments in the Civil Service and other public service bodies as was set out in Section 34 (1) (b) of the 2004 Act.

Appointments to positions of Assistant Secretary General and higher in the civil service are generally undertaken by the Top Level Appointments Committee (TLAC) with the assistance of the Public Appointments Service (PAS). The Government is again committed to ensuring a policy of open recruitment and the role of TLAC, as an independent body, is to support that and ensure that the recruitment and selection process for senior Civil Service posts is accessible to the widest pool of qualified candidates.

TLAC also operates under the Code of Practice issued by the Commission for Public Service Appointments in accordance with the principles of merit, consistency, accountability, probity, best practice and professional confidentiality.

My department has also taken a leadership role on appointments to State Boards. The *Guidelines on Appointments to State Boards*, 2014 provides a framework for appointments to the boards of State Bodies. The guidelines help provide for a more robust and transparent process and assist in both the good governance of state bodies, and, together with other relevant

policies such as the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies, also help in driving progress towards wider Government goals. These guidelines and the Code of Practice, are kept under ongoing review.

Finally, I understand that the Minister for Foreign Affairs has asked his department to undertake a review of the role and appointment of special envoys. The terms of reference are currently being drafted and it is anticipated that the review will be completed by mid-October 2021.

## Budget 2022

49. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if the €51.8 million from the National Training Fund is treated as normal Government expenditure for the purposes of budget 2022; if it will impact the deficit and General Government Balance; the way this expenditure will interact with the budgetary process; and if the same applies to the Social Insurance Fund. [45455/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The National Training Fund and the Social Insurance Fund form part of the General Government sector. As a result, the National Training Fund and Social Insurance Fund expenditures impact the general government expenditure. Similarly, the National Training Fund and Social Insurance Fund receipts are classified as general government revenue. Both revenue and expenditure of the National Training Fund and Social Insurance Fund impact the overall general government balance.

As set out in the Ministers and Secretaries Amendment Act 2013, expenditure of the Social Insurance Fund and National Training Fund form part of the Government Expenditure Ceiling. Consequently, in line with the fiscal strategy set out in the Summer Economic Statement, expenditure of these Funds must be accommodated within the voted spending ceiling for 2022 of €88.2 billion.

In relation to 2022, officials in my Department are currently engaging with officials in the Departments of Social Protection and Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on the projected expenditure levels and receipts to the Social Insurance Fund and the National Training Fund next year. Details in relation to these projections will be included in the 2022 Expenditure Report to be published on Budget day.

## Budget Process

50. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his views on a recent Parliamentary Budget Office report (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45515/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I have noted the recent report by the Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO), *A Well-being Framework for Ireland – the Parliamentary Perspective*.

In July 2021, the first report of the Interdepartmental Working Group (IDWG) was published setting out an initial Well-being Framework for Ireland. This initial Framework sets out an overarching vision of “enabling all our people to live fulfilled lives now and into the future”. The Interdepartmental Report notes that by providing an overarching structure the Well-being

Framework will contribute to the development of a shared understanding of what makes for a better life and enhance strategic alignment in the identification of policy priorities, opportunities, and challenges as well as coordination and co-operation between departments and agencies.

The initial Framework has an outcomes-based approach that is focused on understanding people's experiences across person, place and society. From my Department's perspective, this approach builds on the performance budgeting initiative. It does so by placing an explicit focus on policy goals and evidence of progress toward achieving stated policy outcomes. This is part of a wider set of reforms that have increased the focus on the impact of public services on people's lives such as equality budgeting. In the aggregate, these reforms seek to provide a well-rounded, holistic view of how Ireland is progressing, highlighting where progress is unequal and shaping policies that deliver better results for people.

The *First Report on a Well-being Framework for Ireland* set out a commitment for a second phase of consultation on the Framework. The ongoing development of the Framework will be informed by engaging with a broad range of stakeholders. I understand that the Department of the Taoiseach is preparing an approach for such a consultation.

The *First Report on a Well-being Framework for Ireland* set out an initial dashboard of indicators for the Well-being Framework. This dashboard complements the conceptual framework and measures life and progress in Ireland using a cohesive set of indicators. The creation of such a dashboard is in keeping with the practice of the OECD and other countries that have sought to develop a well-being perspective. The First Report also set out that, from Autumn 2021, the CSO will host an interactive version of the dashboard that will update automatically as data corresponding to individual indicators becomes available. In addition, the First Report also stated that the CSO is intending to publish a 'how we are doing?' section annually which will provide accessible infographics and trends.

In this context, it is important to note my Department's ongoing engagement with the Oireachtas in the development of the performance budgeting framework, including Equality Budgeting and the Public Service Performance Report.

While high-level well-being frameworks are important in terms of developing a shared understanding of what makes for better lives and influencing public debate on strategic priorities, such frameworks do not in-and-of-themselves fulfil the ambition of improving policy and decision-making. My Department recognises the importance of going beyond presenting high-level indicators by developing a knowledge base around well-being as a policy objective and integrating well-being metrics into the various stages of the policy making process. In the Mid-Year Expenditure Report, my Department set out its perspective on how the Well-being Framework can be utilised to locate well-being within existing expenditure policy in order to inform efforts to improve the impact of public policy on people's lives and to build knowledge of well-being as a policy objective, in order to better understand policy challenges and inform the design and implementation of more effective public policies.

## **National Development Plan**

51. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the date of the final publication of the revised National Development Plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45522/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The revised

NDP is currently being finalised and it will set out annual expenditure ceilings for the initial 5 years for each Departmental Vote Group, including capital ceilings for 2022. This document is due to be published in the coming weeks, following final Governmental approval.

As part of the Programme for Government the review was brought forward from 2022 in order to assess the resourcing requirements for the most important challenges facing us as a nation including Covid-19, climate action, housing, balanced regional development, healthcare etc.

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

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

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

The objective of Phase 2 of the NDP is to set out revised sectoral capital allocations as well as providing a renewed focus on delivery of efficient and cost-effective public infrastructure. The range of indicated sectoral priorities will be identified as part of the final revised NDP.

### **Third Level Staff**

52. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he is engaged in discussions to agree revised principles for a new higher education staffing agreement to update the current employment control framework; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45523/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I refer the Deputy to my previous response to PQ32471/21 on 17 June 2021. Officials from my Department engage on an ongoing basis with colleagues in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) on multiple policy and operational issues, including consideration of principles for a Higher Education Staffing Agreement. The purpose of a Higher Education Staffing Agreement, once finalised, will be to update the existing overarching Employment Control Framework (ECF) approach which has been in place since 2010 and which is still in place in a number of sectors in the public service.

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

### **Public Sector Staff**

53. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of general service vacancies filled by Irish language candidates during 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021 in counties Donegal and Sligo; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45525/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Public Appointments Service (PAS) is the independent recruiter for appointments to the civil service. All recruitment is demand-led and PAS undertakes competitions on behalf of the civil service to establish panels that may be drawn upon as vacancies arise in Government Departments or Offices.

Irish speaking candidates may apply for general civil service roles by way of specific bilingual competitions or, alternatively, they may apply for non-bilingual competitions and note their expression of interest for Irish-speaking or bilingual posts.

Please see below number of Irish language position requests received by PAS for general grades competitions in these counties, all of which were successfully filled.

County	2019	2020	2021
Sligo	0	0	0
Donegal	3	2	0

A nationwide Irish language Clerical Officer competition is presently underway for the Civil Service by PAS. I understand that PAS will commence planning for a new Irish language Executive Officer competition during Q3 2021.

### An Garda Síochána

54. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the project timeline for the provision of new accommodation at a Garda station (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45662/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The procurement phase for this project is well progressed and this phase will be completed shortly. It is expected that a contract for the works will be placed following receipt of formal approval from An Garda Síochána and successful completion of all procurement processes. Construction should commence shortly thereafter and is expected to take about 20 months to complete.

### Cybersecurity Policy

55. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if her Department's IT infrastructure is monitored for security breaches on a 24/7 basis; the guidance provided from Government on same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45320/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The IT infrastructure for my Department is monitored for security breaches on a 24/7 basis. My Department readily engages with the National Cyber Security Centre, Government agencies and security partners but for reasons of operational and national security it would not

be appropriate to disclose details of my Department's cyber security arrangements.

Any information in relation to cyber security tools and services could assist criminals in identifying potential vulnerabilities in cybersecurity arrangements. Therefore it is not considered appropriate to disclose any such information or make comment which could in any way compromise my Department's cyber security.

### **Sports Funding**

56. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the timeframe for the announcement of the allocation of sports capital funding grants; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45354/21]

**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 were published earlier this year and all applications are being assessed accordingly. Approximately one thousand of the submitted applications were for 'equipment-only' projects. These applications were assessed first and grants with a total value of €16.6m 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.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

57. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the steps taken by her Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within her Department who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; her plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45376/21]

**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. 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.

My Department is currently implementing an Interim Blended Working Policy to facilitate transition arrangements to blended working for employees in the Department. This follows the announcement of public health measures to commence a gradual and staggered return to

the office from 20 September, 2021. 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.

The number of employees in my Department is currently 364. All employees have been provided with the necessary IT support to enable remote working including access to a cloud based video conferencing system procured via open competition on e-Tenders, the Government's electronic tendering platform.

My Department will continue to provide employees with ongoing up-to-date guidance and supports on blended working arrangements.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

58. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the steps taken by agencies under the remit of her Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within these agencies who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; if there are plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45393/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** Regarding the State Agencies under the remit of my Department, this is an operational matter for the respective Agencies.

In that context, I have forwarded your question to the relevant State Agencies and have requested they respond directly to you on the matter within 10 working days from the date of this reply. Please contact my private office if you have not received a reply within the ten working days.

### **Freedom of Information**

59. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if her attention has been drawn to the published findings of the Office of the Information Commissioner under a case (details supplied); the actions she has taken to ensure accountability for same particularly in view of section 52 of the Freedom of Information Act 2014 which considers the destruction or material alteration of records requested under freedom to constitute an offence; her views on the findings that her Department failed to either realise alterations had taken place or to deal with the freedom of information request appropriately; and the processes that have put in place or that will be put in place to ensure all future freedom of information requests are appropriately dealt with and that no repeat of same occurs. [45712/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** As the Deputy is aware my Department and those bodies under its aegis are subject to the Freedom of Information Act 2014 and remains committed to ensuring that all requests received under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act 2014 are managed effectively and in accordance with the provisions of the Act.

In accordance with Section 11 of the FOI Act the provisions of the Act apply to records held by a service provider who:

*“at the time the request was made, was not an FOI body but was providing a service for an FOI body under a contract for services and contract for services in this definition includes an administrative arrangement between an FOI body and another person”*

In the case referred to by the Deputy the majority of records encompassed by the request were held by a third party organisation that was acting in the role of service provider to the Department.

As the Deputy will be aware, it is a feature of the FOI Act that requesters may request a review of the original decision made by the FOI body itself and may also apply to the Office of the Information Commissioner (OIC) for a further review of the decision of the FOI body. I am advised that in this instance, the original decision and subsequent review, which was issued in April 2021, was appealed to the OIC by the requester.

I am further advised that, following its review, the OIC annulled the original decision and directed the Department to carry out a fresh decision making process in respect of the matter. I wish to clarify that in communicating its decision to the Department, the OIC made no reference to Section 52 of the Act.

I can confirm to the Deputy that on foot of the direction of the OIC my Department has undertaken a fresh decision making process in respect of this matter and that a decision in the regard was issued to the requester. This decision encompassed all relevant records including a number of additional records that had been created in the interim and which would not have formed part of the original decision.

My Department is satisfied that the third party organisation concerned fully cooperated with the process at all times and provided all records that fell within the scope of the request, for each decision and that there is no basis for any suggestion that this organisation engaged in any action that would come within the scope of Section 52 of the FOI Act.

## **Environmental Policy**

60. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the guidelines or regulations that apply to the mulching of mountain land in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45461/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** I understand that this question is about the cutting or grubbing of vegetation on mountain land.

Some areas of mountain land have been designated as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) or Special Protection Areas (SPAs) as part of the Natura 2000 network. Depending on reason for designation of the land, restrictions may have been set on clearing scrub or rough vegetation on that area. In such cases, prior consent under Regulation 30 of the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011, is required so that an assessment can be carried out before the mulching takes place to ensure it will not adversely affect the integrity of the European site based on its conservation objectives.

Similarly, if the land was designated as a Natural Heritage Areas (NHA), prior consent may be required under Section 19 of the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000 if the mulching was liable to destroy or to significantly alter, damage or interfere with the features for which the NHA was designated.

Finally, birds are protected during their nesting season whether the land is designated or not. It is an offence under Section 40 of the Wildlife Act, 1976, as amended, to cut, grub, or otherwise destroy (during the period beginning 1 March and ending on 31 August in any year) any vegetation growing on any land not then cultivated. There are some limited exemptions to this rule.

## Cybersecurity Policy

61. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his Department's IT infrastructure is monitored for security breaches on a 24/7 basis; the guidance provided from Government on same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45314/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department recognises fully that security of its IT infrastructure is key in ensuring the safety and integrity of its systems, files and data. This is achieved through a combination of staff training, security policies and processes and appropriate technological solutions that include security monitoring. For security reasons, my Department does not comment on specific details of its IT Security apparatus supporting this infrastructure.

Guidance from Government in relation to ICT security is a matter for the National Cyber Security Centre.

## Flexible Work Practices

62. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the steps taken by his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within his Department who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; his plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45371/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department is currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. The vast majority of staff of my Department have worked remotely since the end of March 2020. These staff are continuing to work from home; however, a staggered return to workplaces under ongoing public health restrictions has commenced from 20 September, 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 ensure a consistency of approach across Government Departments and Offices and will inform the development of organisation level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of my Department.

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 Chief Information Officer. Further, the Met Éireann Division of my Department provided laptops, monitors and accessories for staff to facilitate remote/hybrid working during the pandemic. As a result, staff have access to remote video conferencing and have the capacity to work remotely when required.

## Flexible Work Practices

63. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the steps taken by agencies under the remit of his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within these agencies who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; if there are plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45388/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** The requested information is not available in my Department. However, it may be obtained by contacting the dedicated e-mail addresses for members of the Oireachtas in respect of the State bodies under the aegis of my Department, as set out in tabular form below.

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

## Homeless Accommodation

64. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of family homeless hubs and the capacity to accommodate family sizes of two, three, four, five and above persons in each local authority area in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45456/21]

65. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of families that were accommodated in temporary hotel accommodation in each local authority area in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form;

and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45457/21]

**66. Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of transitional accommodation units utilised to accommodate homeless family sizes of two, three, four, five and above persons in each local authority area in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45458/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 64 to 66, inclusive, together.

Statutory responsibility in relation to the provision of accommodation and associated services for homeless persons rests with individual housing authorities. My Department's role in relation to homelessness involves the provision of a national framework of policy, legislation and funding to underpin the primary role of housing authorities in addressing homelessness at local level.

While responsibility for the provision of homeless accommodation rests with individual housing authorities, the administration of homeless services is organised on a regional basis with a lead authority in place for each region. A Homelessness Consultative Forum has been established in each region in accordance with Chapter 6 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 2009. Decisions on the range of emergency accommodation services required in each region are a matter for individual housing authorities in consultation with the Management Group of the relevant regional joint Homelessness Consultative Forum.

My Department publishes a detailed monthly report on homelessness, based on data provided by housing authorities and produced through the Pathway Accommodation & Support System (PASS). 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 730 families 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/).

These reports include information broken down by accommodation type at regional level. Emergency accommodation provided in a hotel is included within the private emergency accommodation (PEA) category along with other commercially provided emergency accommodation arrangements. Emergency accommodation provided in family hubs is included within the supported temporary accommodation (STA) category.

My Department has been working with the local authorities to deliver family hubs, which provide more appropriate emergency accommodation for families. There are now 35 hubs operational nationally, offering over 766 units of family accommodation. Of these, 26 of these are in Dublin, with 2 in Galway and Kildare and 1 each in Cork, Clare, Meath, Limerick and Louth. Details on sizes of the families accommodated in these units are not included in the reports on homelessness published by my Department.

*Question No. 65 answered with Question No. 64.*

*Question No. 66 answered with Question No. 64.*

## **Housing Schemes**

67. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the construction status of a development (details supplied); the reason for the delay; if a revised schedule and expected delivery date for occupancy will be provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45469/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The social housing project referred to in the question is being advanced by Mayo County Council with funding support from my Department under the Social Housing Capital Investment Programme. While my Department had provided post-tender (Stage 4) approval for the project to advance to construction, the Council has now advised that it needs to be re-tendered arising from difficulties with elements of the work and the tendered costs. The Council has further advised that the re-tendering process is well advanced and my Department hopes to have a new cost proposal from the Council as soon as possible.

The management of this project, including the timing of the appointment of contractors, the completion of the project and its tenanting, are all matters for the Council. I am very keen that it advances as soon as possible and further detailed information on the specific contract and delivery issues, if needed, should be available directly from Mayo County Council.

### **Commercial Rates**

68. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his attention has been drawn to the fact that funeral directors no longer qualify for a commercial rates waiver for funeral homes, even though due to Covid-19 restrictions homes are not open to the public; if he will be providing them with a rates waiver; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45475/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** In order to continue supporting ratepayers, and in recognition of the impacts of COVID 19 and the associated public health restrictions, the Government put in place a targeted commercial rates waiver for the first 9 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.

As provision has been made for businesses that do not automatically qualify to apply, there are no plans to broaden the scope of automatic eligibility.

### **Housing Policy**

69. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he is taking action to ensure that persons suffering from chronic illnesses which put their health at serious risk can access prioritisation for social housing as part of the Housing for All plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45514/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** Firstly, I must point out that the allocation of homes to those on so-

cial housing waiting lists is a matter for local authorities in exercise of their statutory housing function. Where a household request a priority based on the health needs of a member of the household this will be assessed by the local authority when the applicant household applies and provides all of the medical information to the local authority.

Secondly, the recent launch of *Housing for All* demonstrates that this Government is absolutely committed to ensuring that quality housing solutions are available to everyone in Irish society in particular those in greatest need. The Plan commits to increasing new housing supply to an average of at least 33,000 new units per year over the next decade. This will include over 10,000 social homes each year over the next five years, with 9,500 of these being new-builds, and an average of 6,000 affordable homes for purchase or rent.

Finally, under the Plan, the co-ordination of housing provision with the delivery of key health and social care supports for people with a disability and older people is paramount, recognising the need for greater coordination among State service providers for this kind of care. Under the guiding principle of *Housing for All* and underpinned by a new National Housing Strategy for Disabled People from 2022 all of the agencies will work to deliver appropriately designed housing for people with a disability, in line with the vision and principles of universal design.

### Commercial Rates

70. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he plans to waive commercial rates owed to local authorities beyond the end of September 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45608/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** In order to continue supporting ratepayers, and in recognition of the impacts of COVID 19 and the associated public health restrictions, the Government put in place a targeted commercial rates waiver from January to end September 2021. The 2021 rates waiver scheme 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, banks, building societies and credit unions are not automatically eligible, but may qualify if they can provide proof of serious impact to their local authority. €480m has been allocated by Government to fund the cost of the 2021 commercial rates waiver. There are currently no plans to extend the waiver beyond the end of September 2021.

### Hedge Cutting

71. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he plans to amend legislation in respect of the regulation of boundary hedges and hedgerows with particular reference to height and unrestricted growth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45615/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** Planning legislation places no specific restrictions on the height of trees or hedges, nor does it make any particular provision for remedy from any other nuisance which may be caused by trees in an urban residential area. However, a civil remedy is available through the Courts concerning branches or roots of neighbouring trees encroaching on a person's property.

The possibility of providing a broader civil law remedy for parties affected by high trees and hedges on adjoining properties was raised previously with the Minister for Justice. In this regard, advice was sought on the possibility of legislative provision being made, whereby a person substantially deprived of the enjoyment of their property, such as the deprivation of light caused by high trees on a neighbouring property, could apply to the Courts for an order, and that the Courts could make an order as they see fit, for example, to cut the trees back to an appropriate height. Safety considerations relating to overhanging trees could also potentially be addressed in any such provisions.

In response, the Minister for Justice suggested that disputes of this nature between neighbours could perhaps be more appropriately dealt with through mediation, which is being increasingly used internationally as a tool for the resolution of civil disputes, rather than through the Courts. Legislation subsequently introduced by the Minister for Justice has been enacted as the Mediation Act 2017 (the Act).

The Act, which came into operation on 1 January 2018, contains provisions to underpin a comprehensive statutory framework to promote the resolution of disputes through mediation as an alternative to court proceedings which should ideally be only used as a last resort. In essence, the underlying objective of the Act is to promote mediation as a viable, effective and efficient alternative to court proceedings, thereby reducing legal costs, speeding up the resolution of disputes and reducing the stress and acrimony which often accompanies court proceedings, including those involving adjoining property owners.

## **Water Services**

72. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if not for profit organisations can be liable for large wastewater removal charges from Irish Water (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45621/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Responsibility for the independent economic regulation of the water sector is assigned to the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, or CRU. Water charging policy is based on actual metered consumption, consistent with the requirements of the Water Framework Directive. Under the Water Services (No. 2) Act 2013 Irish Water is required to collect charges, where relevant, from its customers in accordance with a water charges plan approved by the CRU. The CRU, as regulator, is independent in this matter and has come to its own assessment of the appropriate tariff and charging arrangements that shall apply to non-domestic customers, including not for profit organisations in the community and voluntary sector.

Irish Water will readily engage with customers who may be experiencing temporary difficulties. Customers facing such circumstances should contact Irish Water, via its call centre (1850 778 778), at an early date to access the available supports.

## **State Bodies**

73. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will report on the establishment of the proposed new marine and climate unit within the SID structure of An Bord Pleanála to support the development of offshore renewable energy; if a sufficient budget has been allocated to An Bord Pleanála to ensure the proposed staffing levels of one assistant director of planning and five inspectors together with two administrative staff are met; if recruitment for these roles has commenced; if not, when it is envisaged

it will commence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45732/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** My Department is currently finalising a response to An Bord Pleanála's latest draft Workforce Plan in the context of the 2022 budgetary estimates process. This draft Plan includes proposals for the staffing of a new Marine and Climate Unit to implement the role to be assigned to An Bord Pleanála under the Maritime Area Planning Bill currently before the Oireachtas.

### **Wildlife Conservation**

74. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will revoke the open season order for those species that have been classified as red list bird species and of conservation concern. [45744/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** I refer to the reply to Question No. 212 of 16 September 2021 which sets out the position in this matter.

### **Cybersecurity Policy**

75. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his Department's IT infrastructure is monitored for security breaches on a 24/7 basis; the guidance provided from Government on same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45311/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** My Department operates a robust Security Incident Management system which is underpinned by a 24/7 on call ICT service which monitors and responds to all cyber security incidents. My Department implements all recommendations issued by the National Cyber Security Centre as part of our ICT strategy.

### **Patent Applications**

76. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the current approximate wait time for first-time passport applicants to receive their passport; and when his Department estimates the wait time will return to its pre-pandemic duration. [45328/21]

83. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his attention has been drawn to the backlog in respect of first-time passport applications; if his attention has been further drawn to the fact that applications are taking longer than the suggested eight weeks to finalise; the steps that are being taken to speed up this process and tackle the backlog; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45550/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 76 and 83 together.

The current Passport processing 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.

Almost 45% of passports for simple adult renewals continue to issue within one business day while more complex applications take longer.

The Passport Service has received approximately 500,000 applications in 2021 to date, with 111,000 under process. These applications comprise of 63,000 valid applications which are with the Passport Service and 43,000 incomplete applications that require action by the applicant.

25% of valid applications are for adult renewals, 16% are complex renewals for children and 59% are for first time applications.

First time applications for adults and children are complex applications involving measures to assure the true 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 processing of application from children born in Ireland after 2004 due to the need to verify entitlement for Irish citizenship.

The Passport Service began scaling up to more normal operational levels on 4 May 2021, in line with the phased easing of restrictions set out in “COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021 – The Plan Ahead”. Since that date, the Passport Service has issued over 300,000 passports while continuing to operate the emergency service for priority cases for which customers are encouraged to contact our Customer Service Hub if they require assistance. Over 4,000 Foreign Birth Registrations have also been processed in cases of exceptional urgency.

The Passport Service are continually looking for ways to improve efficiency and welcome the Deputy’s proposal in relation to the return of documentation. While Passport Service resources are primarily focused on meeting current demand, we will be reviewing the documentation required to support a passport application and will examine the processes around the verification and processing of supporting documentation with a view to further streamlining the process and reducing turnaround times.

The Passport Tracker Service gives an indication of the estimated delivery date based on the vast majority of applications and is not an intended guarantee of service. I accept the frustration this may cause to applicants and work is ongoing to improve the information provided to customers in relation to their application.

The Customer Service Hub has handled approximately 80,000 customer queries since scaling up operations in June through its phone and web chat services. They also continue to examine ways to meet the very high demand for this service at this time including through the allocation of additional resources.

The Passport Service, like many Government Services, have been impacted by COVID-19. Operations have been maintained notwithstanding the fact that the processing of passports requires physical attendance on site to deliver this service. As a result of well implemented safety protocols our staff were able to assist citizens who required passports for a range of emergency and urgent personal, business or legal reasons, or who had compelling humanitarian needs to travel.

In line with our continued scaling up of services my Department are actively planning for the opening of our Public Offices for the processing of urgent applications for those renewing their passport. This service will resume initially in the public office of the Passport Service in Dublin and we will be making a public announcement on the specific date very soon.

## Passport Services

77. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he can assist with the resolution of an urgent case of an Irish child (details supplied) stranded abroad and unable to return to school due to inability to get a passport renewal seemingly involving a bureaucratic loop in which an Irish embassy is unable to issue a temporary passport until the passport renewal process for the child is completed in Ireland and the Irish passport office seem unable to complete the renewal process without the child's presence at a Garda station in Dublin to get a form signed and stamped; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45355/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The applicant is receiving direct assistance from the relevant Embassy of Ireland supported by the Passport Service. As soon as the required supporting documents are received an emergency travel document will be issued immediately.

## Flexible Work Practices

78. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps taken by his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within his Department who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; his plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45368/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** My Department is fully supportive of the implementation of the national remote work strategy. The majority of staff have the ability to work remotely and have access to videoconferencing facilities utilising a range of cloud and on-premises technologies to support blended working. Some staff are unable to work remotely due to their presence being required to carry out essential duties and deliver essential services in our buildings. Video conferencing facilities are part of the department's worldwide communications infrastructure. Equipment and licenses for this are tendered through the Office of Government Procurement.

By spring 2022, it is intended to have developed a blended working policy that will support the wider Civil Service Blended Working Framework where the Department will formalise the approach to how staff work remotely.

## Flexible Work Practices

79. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps taken by agencies under the remit of his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within these agencies who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; if there are plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45385/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Department of Foreign Affairs does not have any agencies under its remit.

## Passport Services

80. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the content of the planned passport reform programme of his Department; the timeline of the planned roll-out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45406/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** There has been an ongoing process of reform within the Passport Service since 2016. The programme has delivered a number of high profile and successful Improvements for citizens at home and abroad who rely on this service.

This includes the facility for online applications. In 2019, online applications accounted for 47% of all applications received. Despite the challenges currently facing the Passport Service, 40% of online adult renewals issued last week in 2 working days or less, and over 93% issued in less than 10 working days. Further enhancements over the past number of years means that Passport Online can now be accessed by first time applicants, both children and adults, in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Great Britain, Europe, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA. All Irish citizens, including children, can use the online system to renew their passports from anywhere in the world.

Recent reforms have also improved our fraud detection capacity, following the introduction of new facial recognition technology, which improves efficiency and the integrity of the passport system. Maintaining that integrity is essential to ensuring that the Irish passport is one of the most secure in the world, and one of the most effective, in terms of granting citizens visa-free access to most countries in the world.

The next major element of the reform programme will be to replace the core technology underpinning the Passport Service. The current system, the Automated Passport System or APS, was launched in 2004 and will be replaced by a more modern, integrated system. The procurement process for the new system will conclude very shortly and is expected to be operational in 2023.

The Passport Service continues to identify efficiencies in the service. We recently concluded arrangements that provides applicants with a MyGovID profile with the option to pre-populate information to their online application form details, saving further time.

The Passport Service, like many Government Services, have been impacted by COVID-19. Operations have been maintained notwithstanding the fact that the processing of passports requires physical attendance on site to deliver this service. As a result of well implemented safety protocols our staff were able to assist citizens who required passports for a range of emergency and urgent personal, business or legal reasons, or who had compelling humanitarian needs to travel. In line with our continued scaling up of services my Department are actively planning for the opening of our Public Offices for the processing of urgent applications for those renewing their passport. This service will resume initially in the public office of the Passport Service in Dublin and we will be making a public announcement on the specific date very soon.

### **Foreign Conflicts**

81. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the actions the Government has taken and is taking through its role on the UN Security Council and by other means to contribute to the search for the approximately 2,700 Yazidi women and children who are still missing as a result of being taken into captivity by ISIS seven years ago; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45540/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I welcome all efforts to identify

and protect the victims of ISIS brutality, ensure accountability for perpetrators, and support the repatriation and resettlement of Yazidis, allowing them to return to their homes.

Ireland is a member of the Global Coalition Against Daesh. On the Security Council, Ireland has consistently called for full accountability for crimes committed by Daesh/ISIS. I strongly support the work of the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Daesh (UNITAD), and welcome the extension of its mandate on 17 September for a period of one year.

Ireland welcomes efforts by the Iraqi government to support women and children who were captured by ISIS, notably the passage of the Yazidi Survivors Bill. I encourage full implementation of the provisions of this Bill.

Ireland also continues to support the work of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), including their efforts to promote human rights, and to promote the safe, dignified and voluntary return of internally displaced persons.

### **Foreign Conflicts**

82. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps the Government is taking through its role on the UN Security Council and by other means to specifically address the religious element to the violence between Fulani herders and sedentary farmers in northern Nigeria; if the Government has raised with the Nigerian Government the disproportionate impact this violence has on Christians in Nigeria; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45541/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy):** I am deeply concerned by the ongoing violence in Nigeria. Conflict poses a serious challenge to the country's stability, and impacts 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 to 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.

*Question No. 83 answered with Question No. 76.*

### **Election Monitoring Missions**

84. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on the continuation of the decision due to Covid-19 restrictions to suspend the deployment of any of the 500 persons who have been vetted and trained as election monitors to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe or the EU Election Monitoring System; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45739/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy):** I refer the Deputy to Parliamentary Questions No. 304, 305 and 311 of 26 May 2021, Parliamentary Questions No. 303 and 310 of 26 May 2021 and Parliamentary Question No. 777 of 24 March 2021 on international election observation.

The Department of Foreign Affairs facilitates an Election Observation Roster of suitably skilled and vetted volunteers who are available to participate at short notice in election observation missions, organised by the OSCE and EU. The current Roster of approximately 199 volunteers is in place since 1 January 2019. Issues related to the size and duration of the roster were addressed in Parliamentary Question No. 410 of 24 November 2020.

Participation in election observation missions poses particular COVID-19 risks due to transit through international airport hubs, extensive in-country travel and interactions with observers from a significant number of other countries. This potentially exposes to COVID-19, not only election monitors, but also those whom they come into contact with in the host country and when they return home. As such, since March 2020, Ireland has not nominated election observers for EU and OSCE Election Observation Missions.

However, given the re-opening of non-essential international travel and the progress of Ireland's vaccination programme, my officials are working to clarify the safe conditions for volunteer election observers before, during and after their participation in Election Observation Missions. This is with a view to early resumption of nomination of volunteer observers from the roster for EU and OSCE Election Observation Missions on a case by case basis, subject to adjudication of duty of care.

### **Cybersecurity Policy**

85. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Defence if his Department's IT infrastructure is monitored for security breaches on a 24/7 basis; the guidance provided from Government on same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45306/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I can confirm that my Department's IT Infrastructure has a breadth of infrastructure monitoring in place and provide a 24/7 service. However, 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.

Guidance from Government in relation to ICT security is a matter for the National Cyber Security Centre.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

86. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Defence the steps taken by his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within his Department who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; his plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45363/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** 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.

Approximately 97% of staff within my Department have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing, and the capacity to work remotely. These services are provided via the Build-to-Share Managed Desktop service supplied by the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO).

### **Flexible Work Practices**

87. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Defence the steps taken by agencies under the remit of his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within these agencies who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; if there are plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45380/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The only agency under the remit of my Department is the Army Pensions Board, which is a statutory independent body, established under the Army Pensions Acts. The board comprises three members, all of whom have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing, and the capacity to work remotely. These services are provided via the Build-to-Share Managed Desktop service supplied by the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO).

## **Defence Forces**

88. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence the role that members of the Reserve Defence Forces played at vaccination centres during the pandemic; the number of members that were stationed at vaccination centres; the number of hours they worked; the payment they received; and if no payment was received, the reason; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45611/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a Joint Task Force was established to coordinate the Defence Forces contribution to the whole-of-Government COVID-19 response. A wide range of supports have since been provided to the HSE as well as to other Departments and Agencies. The Defence Forces are also represented on the High Level Task Force for Covid-19 Vaccination and continue to provide transportation and logistical supports to the HSE in the rollout of the Covid 19 vaccination programme.

A number of Reserve Defence Force (RDF) members are currently engaged, on a voluntary basis and where personal circumstances allow, in authorised COVID-19 activities in a supporting role to the response of the Permanent Defence Force (PDF) to the COVID19 crisis. In this regard, members of the Reserve served a total of 1,457 Covid-related days in 2020 with a further 778 such days served by RDF members in 2021, to the end of August. Members of the Reserve are paid in such circumstances and their support is welcomed.

To date, three members of the RDF have been involved in vaccinating at vaccination centres. They have completed 26 shifts, each of 12 hours duration. All such RDF personnel receive the corresponding day's duty pay for each shift, equivalent to that of their PDF colleagues, plus the applicable COVID-19 allowance for their engagement in a pandemic related activity.

## **Defence Forces**

89. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Defence the number of females who have included family care issues among their stated reasons for seeking inter service transfers or discharge from the Naval Service over the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45708/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** An individual member of the Permanent Defence Force may be discharged for any one of the twenty-six prescribed reasons set out in Defence Force Regulations which cover various matters. Discharge citing family care issues is not included as a category type and is therefore not recorded.

However, some other measures have been introduced as a method of gaining further feedback and insight for the organisation. Exit interviews were introduced as part of the discharge process in March 2021. There has been one female member of the Naval Service who was interviewed upon discharge in the intervening period and family care issues were not cited in her reasons for leaving.

Online Exit Surveys were also introduced in May 2020. This survey contains a series of questions on a range of topics including; perceptions held in relation to the job, decisions for leaving the organisation, work life balance and discrimination. Of the 117 surveys completed in this time, 7% of the respondents were female (5% did not state gender). In terms of the Deputy's specific query on female members of the Naval Service who have discharged, one female member stated that working in the Naval Service was incompatible with having a family

due to the requirement for sea going rotations. In respect of requests for transfers, I am advised by the Military Authorities that there is no requirement to state a specific reason for transfer owing to the fact that it may be of a personal nature, therefore the data requested by the Deputy is not available.

The Deputy may be aware that there are a number of facilities available to serving Defence Forces personnel in terms of work life supports. First and foremost Defence Forces members are entitled to maternity leave, paternity leave, parental leave, parents leave and term time in line with national legislation.

In addition a range of 'harmony' measures have also been implemented including 'hot desking' for certain enlisted and commissioned personnel who have been posted away from their home address, and remote working is considered for a limited number of personnel depending on the circumstances.

Additionally, I am advised that a number of family friendly overseas appointments for commissioned and enlisted personnel have been introduced whereby the normal 6-month tour of duty can be 'shared' with another member of the Defence Forces, resulting in a 3-month deployment. While this measure has been restricted as a result of the COVID pandemic, it is an acknowledgement of the importance of a family-friendly approach.

Personnel in the Defence Forces serving both at home and overseas have an array of supports available to them, including in-house medical teams, critical incident response teams, chaplaincy services and support services through the Personnel Support Service (PSS). The PSS operates within each installation of the Defence Forces and consists of a team of occupational social workers and trained military support personnel. The Department of Defence also provides an external confidential counselling service to all personnel.

The Naval Service has a Female Forum, for all ranks, that meets regularly to discuss female issues relevant to the Naval Service. Importantly it provides both support to females in the service and to develop a network to extend their support opportunities and enhance their Naval experience.

Finally, as the Deputy will be aware, the Independent Commission on the Defence Forces is currently examining a range of issues in the Defence Forces and its terms of reference encompass the setting out of a strategic perspective on HR policies and associated strategies.

## **Defence Forces**

90. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Defence the length of time it takes for a complaint of sexual assault to be dealt with currently in the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45709/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I wish to reiterate that all members of the Defence Forces have the right to be treated with respect, equality and dignity and to carry out their duties free from any form of sexual harassment, harassment or bullying. Unacceptable forms of behaviour are not tolerated in the Defence Forces and where there are allegations of offences having been committed, investigations will be initiated by the appropriate authorities.

I am advised by the military authorities that complaints of unacceptable behaviour can be dealt with at different levels, either by way of an informal approach or formal process. Specially trained Designated Contact Persons (DCPs) are available to assist complainants. The formal procedure requires that a complaint is made in writing.

These complaints are dealt with by the military chain of command either through the legal/disciplinary process or by administrative action. Administrative instruction A7, Chapter 1, ‘*Interpersonal Relationships in the Defence Forces*’ is the Defence Forces’ policy document which deals with sexual harassment, harassment and bullying.

I am further advised that in the event that a complaint of a criminal nature is reported, I understand that the standard procedure is that the matter is investigated immediately by the Military Police. In line with other investigations of this nature in this jurisdiction, each investigation differs depending on the complexities of the case, it is therefore not possible to define a timeframe for the investigation of such complaints.

Where allegations of serious criminal incidents among serving members are brought to the attention of the Military Police, they are traditionally passed to An Garda Síochána for their consideration and investigation who have the lawful authority, skills and resources to investigate such matters.

I can assure the Deputy that I, as Minister, working closely with the Chief of Staff, and the Secretary General, am committed to ensuring that Defence Forces personnel are provided with a safe working environment as exemplified in the DF Dignity Charter and the other policies and procedures in place. The health and safety of personnel in the Defence Forces remains a priority for the Government.

### **Defence Forces**

91. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Defence if he will make provision to allow serving and retired male and female victims of sexual abuse, harassment and gender discrimination in the Defence Forces an opportunity to tell their experiences of abuse anonymously during the inquiry stage of the external commission that is being called for by a group (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45710/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I listened with concern to the women who recounted their experiences on the Women of Honour programme on RTE Radio on the 11 September 2021. I expressed my willingness to meet with the participants, should they wish to do so, and I am pleased to say that my offer has been accepted.

I have instructed my officials to make the necessary arrangements without delay. In the meantime, I also wish to confirm that the Secretary General and senior officials of the Department are meeting with a number of the participants this week.

I would like to reiterate again in the strongest possible terms that all members of the Defence Forces have a right to be treated with respect, equality and dignity and to carry out their duties free from any form of sexual harassment, harassment or bullying. Unacceptable forms of behaviour are not tolerated in the Defence Forces and where there are allegations of offences having been committed, investigations will be initiated by the appropriate authorities.

Terms of reference for the Independent Review, which had been advancing in recent months, are being reviewed in light of the RTE programme, and are being finalised. The purpose of this Independent Review, which will be conducted by independent and unbiased personnel, is to examine the effectiveness of current policies and procedures for dealing with workplace issues such as dignity, bullying, harassment, sexual harassment and discrimination.

I very much look forward to meeting with the women profiled in the programme, and listening to their views.

I can assure the Deputy that both I, as Minister, and the Defence Organisation, are committed to providing a safe place of work for all employees.

### **National Broadband Plan**

92. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Education if her Department is engaging with National Broadband Ireland to ensure that schools currently devoid of broadband services will be fast-tracked for the National Broadband Scheme; if she will investigate the circumstances of a school (details supplied) in County Mayo with a view to providing the school with an adequate service; her views on whether it is acceptable for any school to be devoid of a stable internet service in 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45281/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The policy of my Department is to offer the best quality connectivity to all schools in line with the technical solutions available in the market and within financial constraints. Currently investment of some €13m is allocated annually for the provision of internet connectivity to schools. Broadband capacity can vary across geographical locations and is dependent on local infrastructure which can impact on the service that can be provided in individual schools.

The primary broadband scheme operates off existing infrastructure on the whole and the providers on the Primary Broadband Framework access this infrastructure to deliver the service to the schools. The Department does not put in place such infrastructure.

In relation to the school referred to by the Deputy the school opted to leave the schools broadband programme and it currently has a private connection. If the school is interested in re-joining the schools broadband programme, the school should record their request with the schools broadband service desk and the school will be included in the next available tender for broadband services to schools, at which point the level of connectivity that can be provided can be determined. The Broadband service desk is the Department's dedicated broadband service desk which is managed by the Professional Development Service for Teachers - Technology in Education (PDST-TiE). They can be contacted by phoning 1800334466 or by emailing [broadbandservicedesk@pdst.ie](mailto:broadbandservicedesk@pdst.ie).

The school referred to is included in the National Broadband Plan Intervention Area, and my Department is working closely with the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications on the implementation of the National Broadband Plan Intervention area, including the School Connection Points under the Broadband Connection Points programme, all of which will see almost 700 primary schools provided with high speed connectivity by the end of 2022. Implementation of this programme is currently underway.

### **Cybersecurity Policy**

93. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Education if her Department's IT infrastructure is monitored for security breaches on a 24/7 basis; the guidance provided from Government on same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45307/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** In relation to guidance from Government, the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) which is located within the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, is the primary cyber security authority in the State. The NCSC provides a range of cyber security services to operators of Critical National Infrastructure, Government Departments and Agencies. My Department's cyber security

protocols are supported by the work of the NCSC and the national computer security incident response team, CSIRT, which provides early warnings, alerts, announcements and dissemination of information about risk and incidents to my Department.

My Department implements multiple Cybersecurity protocols and measures including 24X7 IT Security Monitoring, User Awareness, Perimeter Security, Anti-virus/Anti-Malware, Email and Web filtering, System Patching, Risk Management, Policies, Regular Vulnerability Assessments/Penetration Testing, Mobile Device Management, Access Management, Incident Management, Event Monitoring, Information Security Governance, GDPR Awareness, Disaster Recovery, Offline backups, Supplier Management and Encryption

### **Education Standards**

94. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Education if she will report on progress made to date on the commitment to reduce the primary level pupil-teacher ratio to 25:1 with emphasis on those classrooms which currently experience ratios of 30:1 and above; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45332/21]

**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 is 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 pupils 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. Any further reductions of the pupil teacher ratio will be considered as part of the annual budgetary process.

### **Educational Disadvantage**

95. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Education the number of mainstream teaching posts, special education teaching posts and special needs assistants added at each of primary and post-primary levels for the 2021-2022 school year; the way these numbers compare to commitments made for each in 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45333/21]

**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.

At primary level, Budget 2021 provided for 394 posts to reduce further the primary staffing schedule by one point, bringing this to a historically low level of 25:1, and to reduce the retention schedule by three points. This measure will help to ensure that less pupils are required to

recruit or retain a teacher.

Some 268 additional mainstream teachers in schools will be recruited to meet demographic-related demand due to the expected overall increases in the number of pupils enrolled in schools at both primary and post primary levels.

An additional 145 Special Education teachers were provided for in Budget 2021, while 990 SNA posts were allocated as part of the Budget.

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.

### Site Acquisitions

96. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education if her Department has identified a site in Glanmire, County Cork for a new special school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45358/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Officials in my Department have been working towards the acquisition of a permanent site to meet the needs of a new special school and have engaged with officials in Cork City Council in that respect.

A suitable site has been identified and engagement with the landowner is ongoing with a view to reaching agreement in principle as soon as possible.

I can assure the Deputy that my Department is working to advance the site acquisition process for the school in question as quickly as possible, however, due to the commercially sensitive nature of site acquisitions generally, it is not possible to comment further at this stage.

### Flexible Work Practices

97. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Education the steps taken by her Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within her Department who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; her plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45364/21]

**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. Following the Taoiseach's announcement on the 1st of September, my department is now in the process of introducing a phased return to the workplace.

In relation to the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work in my department, 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 and Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

Staff of my department have the ability to participate in video and web conferencing meet-

ings on multiple platforms and can join a meeting on a desktop, laptop, mobile phone or land-line. My Department has approximately 700 Cisco Webex seats to enable staff members to host meetings on the Webex platform, which are shared with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science\*. The Webex seats were procured in accordance with the Office of Government Procurement's guidelines for procuring goods and services.

\*The Department of Education ICT unit provides ICT shared services for the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

98. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Education the steps taken by agencies under the remit of her Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within these agencies who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; if there are plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45381/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The information sought in relation to the aegis bodies under the remit of my Department is not held by my Department. Contact details for the State Bodies under the aegis of my Department are set out in the attached document, should the Deputy wish to contact them directly with this query.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-22\_pq9822092021\_en.docx ">State Bodies under the Remit of the Dept. of Education </a>]

### **Educational Disadvantage**

99. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Education the assistance available to a DEIS school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45405/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Currently investment of some €13m is allocated annually for the provision of internet connectivity to schools through my Department's School Broadband Access Programme. As you will be aware, broadband capacity can vary across geographical locations and is dependent on local infrastructure which can impact on the service that can be provided in individual schools.

The school referred to by the Deputy currently has a private broadband connection having opted to not avail of a connection through the Schools Broadband Programme, however if the school is interested in re-joining the programme the school should record their request with the Schools Broadband Service Desk to be included in the next available tender for broadband services to schools. At that point it can be determined what the best level of connectivity available will be. The Broadband service desk is the Department's dedicated broadband service desk which is managed by the Professional Development Service for Teachers - Technology in Education (PDST-TiE). They can be contacted by phoning 1800334466 or by emailing [broadbandservicedesk@pdst.ie](mailto:broadbandservicedesk@pdst.ie).

My Department spends just over €150 million annually to provide a suite of supports to schools in the DEIS programme, of which €16.2 million, in the form of a DEIS grant was allocated to schools ahead of schedule for the 2020/21 school year. This is an annual grant to

support learning in the context of DEIS for the academic year. In recognition of the difficulties faced by some students to engage with remote learning, at the time the grant issued last year all DEIS schools were informed by letter that they could consider using some of their DEIS funding to support pupils' learning, for example to arrange access to additional materials of supports for students during the move to remote teaching and learning caused by Covid-19. It is a matter for each individual school to determine how best to use this funding, but it is intended to support the objectives of the DEIS programme.

My Department provided €100m in grant funding to recognised primary, special and post-primary schools to address their ICT needs during 2020, the final issue of funding under the €210m investment programme underpinning the implementation of the Digital Strategy for Schools. This included €50m in respect of the 2020-2021 school year brought forward and issued in December 2020. Schools were advised that they could use this funding to support the continuity of teaching and learning during the pandemic. Funding is paid to DEIS schools at a higher rate than non DEIS. The funding is intended to enable schools to implement their Digital Learning Plan through provision of appropriate infrastructure. This includes Desktop PCs, laptops, tablets or hybrid devices, projectors/flat screens, cloud-based tools and software applications, and learning platforms.

### **School Equipment**

100. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Education if she will expedite an intervention by the school's broadband service for a school (details supplied) given the poor broadband service currently available and the large number of pupils adversely affected by same; if the school is in the contract area for a national broadband contract; and if so, when a fibre broadband service will be delivered to the school. [45441/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The policy of my Department is to offer the best quality connectivity to all schools in line with the technical solutions available in the market and within financial constraints, through the Schools Broadband Programme. Currently investment of some €13m is allocated annually for the provision of internet connectivity to schools. As you will be aware, broadband capacity can vary across geographical locations and is dependent on local infrastructure which can impact on the service that can be provided in individual schools.

The school referred to by the Deputy is currently in contract with a provider of high speed broadband for a 100 Mbp/s fibre to the cabinet broadband connection which is the best available. This contract is in its final year, so services for this school will be included in the next available broadband tender, thus ensuring a new service will be in put in place once the current contract expires. This school is not in the National Broadband Plan intervention area.

I have asked my officials to request that the Schools Broadband Service Desk (1800 334466) contact the school to ensure that the maximum service on their current connection is being received, and to investigate if internal networking issues may be impacting services in the school be it the wireless or wired network.

### **Schools Administration**

101. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education if children suffering from cyclical vomiting syndrome will be able to sit the 2022 leaving certificate in an alternative sitting should their illness flare up; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45464/21]

**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.

### **Special Educational Needs**

102. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Education the reason a child (details supplied) in County Donegal is not getting access to SNA support; if additional information supplied will be considered; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45524/21]

**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 Departments website.

My Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations.

The NCSE have confirmed that the school made an exceptional review application for the school year 21/22. The review outcome was an increase of .5 of an SNA post, bringing to 3.33 the total mainstream allocation of SNAs to the school for the 2021/22 school year. This was communicated to the school by letter dated 29/06/2021.

The school appealed the decision which resulted in a new review, and a school visit that took place on 10/09/2021. The NCSE state that the outcome of the latest review was communicated to the school on 17/09/2021 advising that the total mainstream SNA allocation to the school now stands at 3.83, following a further increase of .5 of an SNA.

## Education Schemes

103. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the fact that a number of schools are awaiting payment for the DEIS literacy and numeracy summer camp; the number of claims made that have been paid; the number that have not been paid; the issues there are with payments being made; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45613/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Summer Camp programme is a voluntary programme which has been delivered annually in approximately 70 DEIS Band 1 primary schools for many years. The aim of the Summer Camp Programme is to provide rich educational experiences for pupils, which foster a sense of belonging and creativity and confidence in their learning.

In the context of the school closures associated with Covid-19, the programme was extended in 2020 to all DEIS primary schools to provide additional and inclusive resourcing in DEIS Band 1, Band 2 and rural DEIS schools.

In 2021 the DEIS Summer Camp Programme was again made available to all DEIS primary schools. As in previous years, the emphasis of the programme is on supporting the wellbeing and the engagement of those pupils who are considered by the school as having the greatest level of need, following the interruption to schooling earlier in the year

Schools were invited to register their interest in the programme at the end of May and once they confirmed their participation, the Department immediately issued the full resource grant for each camp through Navan and Dublin West Education Centres.

220 schools registered for the programme to hold a total 353 camps involving more than 10,000 pupils over the summer months.

To date, the Department has received payment claims from 219 of the 220 schools that have taken part in the 2021 DEIS Summer Camp Programme.

The Department undertook a review of claim forms and where any issues arose the Department followed up directly with the relevant school. This review process is now completed and it is anticipated that all teachers who took part in the programme (and whose claims have been received) will be paid on the Department's Primary Teachers Payroll run on September 30th 2021.

### **School Accommodation**

104. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Education the current position regarding the new school building and ASD unit for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45614/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The project at Oaklands Community College has been devolved to Laois & Offaly Education and Training Board (LOETB) for delivery.

This project is currently at Stage 2a of the architectural planning process. Once the Stage 2a report submission is approved by my Department, the next step for the Design Team will be to obtain the statutory planning approvals.

While at this early stage it is not possible to provide a timeline for completion of the project, LOETB will be engaging directly with the school authority to keep it informed of progress.

### **State Examinations**

105. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education if an appeal of an accredited grade in respect of a student (details supplied) in County Kerry will be registered and reviewed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45616/21]

**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.

### **School Curriculum**

106. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Education if she plans to introduce digital literacy and online safety into the core education curriculum at primary and secondary school level; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45711/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Considerable work has been done in the development of curricula on digital literacy. At both primary and post-primary levels considerable scope for building the capacity of students in the area of digital literacy is provided for through the emphasis on dispositions, competencies and skills as foundational elements of the curriculum. Specifically, in the newly introduced Framework for Junior Cycle digital literacy

skills are promoted through the eight Key Skills (all skills have an ICT/digital component) and through the Statements of Learning.

Currently at post-primary level, there are several programmes and courses in ICT and Digital Literacy already in place, particularly the Junior Cycle Short Course in Digital Literacy and the IT courses in the Leaving Certificate Applied programme. To a lesser extent, the recently-introduced Leaving Certificate subject in Computer Science also looks at aspects of digital literacy.

In addition, areas such as Wellbeing and its constituent programmes in Social, Personal and Health Education, Relationships and Sexuality Education and Civic, Social and Political Education also underpin skills of digital literacy in engaging with the subject material in these courses.

In addition, in the ongoing reviews of the Primary Curriculum and of the Senior Cycle the skills of, or skills closely related to, digital literacy, have featured strongly in all discussions on future provision.

The Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 also promotes the development of digital literacy in our young people and the importance of respectful online communications. The development of a new Digital Strategy for Schools is now well underway and will be informed by the learnings from the current strategy and the experience of teachers, schools leaders, students and parents regarding the embedding of digital technologies across the curriculum as well as the impact of remote learning during school closures. The new strategy will also take into consideration government objectives and priorities, national and international experience and will look to address and incorporate new and emerging issues and trends in digital technology and online safety. To ensure a comprehensive review of the existing strategy and to take account of new and emerging themes from the point of view of all relevant stakeholders, a wide ranging consultation framework has been developed. The overall consultation process is an integral part of the development of the new strategy and key to ensuring its successful implementation. Publication is planned for later this year.

In addition development has commenced on a new Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy strategy for early years, primary and post primary schools, a successor to The National Strategy: Literacy & Numeracy for Learning and life 2011-2020 and Interim Review 2017, The strategy will be developed against robust research to include consideration of national and international practice, stakeholder consultations to include school leaders, teachers and learners and public engagement. The new strategy will set out a clear vision for raising standards of teaching and learning of literacy to include digital literacy and numeracy and identify key priorities and actions to be delivered over the coming years.

There are extensive training and curricular supports, including through the Social Personal Health Education (SPHE) curriculum, the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and the Webwise Programme, to assist schools in the development of policies and practices on the safe use of the internet and on the prevention of bullying including cyber-bullying. The PDST and its Webwise team have developed dedicated resources for teachers, parents, children and young people which gives practical information and advice on the safe, ethical and responsible use of the internet and addresses key issues such as cyberbullying, sexting, image sharing, respectful communication, social media, popular apps and more. The Webwise resources are available at [www.webwise.ie](http://www.webwise.ie).

## **School Transport**

107. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education the steps she has taken to address the crisis of school bus places in the current school year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45737/21]

**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, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who completed 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 who 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.

Bus Éireann has confirmed that to date 104,324 pupils have been issued tickets for the School Transport Scheme. This number is changing as tickets continue to be allocated to pupils.

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 for transport 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.

Wider considerations relating to operation of the scheme 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 Accommodation**

108. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education the progress of the new secondary school build to be based in Charlesland, Greystones, County Wicklow; when planning permission to build will be lodged; and the planned timeline for completion. [45742/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The project referred to by the Deputy is in early architectural planning which involves site surveys, school design stages and the prepa-

ration of Planning Permission.

As part of the conditions of sale, the lodgement of planning permission is under the remit of Vendor. My Department has been working closely with the vendor to expedite a planning application for the new school.

As with all school building projects, pre-planning meetings are required with the Local Authority in advance of preparing a planning application to ensure the highest probability of a successful planning application in the shortest time possible. A considerable amount of work is required following the pre-planning meeting to prepare a suitably detailed application. It is anticipated that the planning application for Greystones CC will be lodged in Q4 2021.

It is not possible to provide an indicative timeframe for the progression of the project to tender and construction stages until such time as the necessary statutory approvals have been secured.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

109. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Education if she will outline planned research into the impact on student learning from the disruption during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45746/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, the Department of Education Inspectorate has monitored educational provision by schools in both remote and onsite schooling contexts. Research carried out by the Inspectorate has captured a range of perspectives, including those of principals, teachers, parents and students, on how schools have operated, on teaching and learning, and on pupils'/students' experience of school and their engagement in learning. This research has included surveys of different stakeholders, discussions with school principals, and inspectors meeting with focus groups of students and parents.

A suite of reports on research on the return to school carried out by the Inspectorate in the September-December 2020 period is available at: [www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/#reports-and-other-information](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/#reports-and-other-information).

A further suite of reports on research on provision for remote teaching and learning during the period of school closure in January and February 2021 is available at [www.gov.ie/en/collection/de987-remote-teaching-and-learning-reports/](http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/de987-remote-teaching-and-learning-reports/).

The outcomes of the Department of Education Inspectorate research, together with research carried out by a range of national research and academic institutions, have informed the ongoing supports and guidance provided by the Department of Education to schools to ensure that teaching and learning experiences are as meaningful as possible for all pupils/students in both a remote and a face-to-face schooling context.

The Department of Education will continue to monitor the impact of the pandemic on learners in light of the ongoing research from its Inspectorate and from academic institutions and research agencies.

### **Departmental Strategies**

110. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education the details of the develop-

ment of a new digital strategy for schools and measures in place to further support digital online learning for primary and secondary schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45747/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** As the Deputy may be aware, I announced the development of a new Digital Strategy for Schools in April this year alongside a wide-ranging consultation process. To ensure a comprehensive review of the existing strategy and to take account of new and emerging themes from the point of view of all relevant stakeholders, a wide ranging consultation framework has been developed. The overall consultation process is an integral part of the development of the new strategy and key to ensuring its successful implementation. The various elements of the consultation framework are set out at [www.gov.ie/en/consultation/7d09a-digital-strategy-for-schools/](http://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/7d09a-digital-strategy-for-schools/) and this process is now well underway. To further consider key issues arising from the initial elements of the consultation process it is intended to hold a series of focus groups in the coming weeks. The ultimate objective to have a new Digital Strategy for Schools finalised before the end of this year.

Learnings from the implementation of the current strategy and the experience of teachers, school leaders, students and parents regarding the embedding of digital technologies across the curriculum and the opportunities provided by this, as well the impact of remote learning during COVID-19, will inform the overall development of the new strategy.

It will also take into consideration government objectives and priorities, national and international experience and look to address and incorporate new and emerging issues and trends in digital technology to inform future policy in this critically important area of education.

In terms of measures to further support digital online learning for primary and secondary schools, I am sure the Deputy can appreciate that measures for remote learning were put in place due to school closures in response to Covid 19. It is not intended that remote learning would be a feature of the current school landscape now that schools are fully open other than in the one context of those pupils/students who are certified as being very high risk and cannot attend school. All schools have fully reopened safely. Public health has reviewed the measures put in place to ensure safe operation of schools and is satisfied that these infection prevention and control measures, when implemented correctly and adhered to, will continue to keep the school community safe.

### **School Management**

111. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education her plans to develop new measures to support school leadership; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45748/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** 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.

As part of the COVID-19 supports provided to schools in 2020, funding was specifically provided for Principals who undertake teaching duties in primary schools to provide for a mini-

imum of one release day per week. Schools have been advised that, in the context of COVID-19, the additional allocation of Principal Release Days will remain in place for the 2021/22 school year.

There are also extensive CPD opportunities and supports for School Leaders provided by the Centre for School Leadership (CSL). These supports include the development of a coherent continuum of professional development for school leaders commencing with pre-appointment training through to induction of newly appointed principals to continuous professional development throughout a school leader's career. The centre is also involved in coaching, mentoring and the development of professional qualifications for school leaders. The CSL website ([www.csfireland.ie](http://www.csfireland.ie)) provides extensive information on supports available to school principals and school leaders.

The Distributed Leadership Model enables schools to align the responsibilities of senior and middle leadership teams more clearly to the identified needs and priorities of the school. The model allows for the distribution of the range of responsibilities for various leadership roles and provides opportunities for teachers to develop their leadership capacity.

### State Examinations

112. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education her plans in place to support students due to sit the leaving certificate examinations in 2022; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45749/21]

**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 conjunction 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 developed in consultation with public health specialists. There will also be further engagement with stakeholders in this matter.

### **Departmental Projects**

113. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education the measures taken to implement the two priority projects planned under the EU-NRRP funding of €63.5 million for school broadband and digital infrastructure for schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45750/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) has been developed by the Government so that Ireland can access funding under the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility. Ireland is expected to receive €988 million in grants under the Facility.

The Recovery and Resilience Facility is the largest component of NextGenerationEU, the European Union's response to the global pandemic. The aim is to help repair the immediate economic and social damage brought about by the pandemic and to prepare for a post-Covid Europe that is greener, more digital, more resilient and fit to face the future.

Under this facility, the Department of Education applied for and will receive funding in respect of two projects to provide digital infrastructure and funding to schools, high speed

broadband connectivity for primary schools where the National Broadband Plan and commercial provision will not provide such connectivity (Project A), and funding for schools to provide for interventions to address the digital divide, particularly access to digital devices and relevant ICT infrastructure (Project B).

Project A will provide €13.5m in funding. This will support an intervention project whereby those primary schools outside of the National Broadband Plan Intervention area, and in areas where commercial provision is insufficient, will be provided with high speed connectivity of 100 Mbp/s or greater. Through this project, the National Broadband Plan Intervention Area implementation, and commercial provision, it is intended to provide high speed connectivity to all primary schools by the end of 2022. This will all operate under the Schools Broadband Programme. Implementation of this project, led by a Steering Group including representatives from my Department, the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications, HEAnet, and the PDST, is underway.

Project B will provide €50m in funding for schools. This will issue through a one-off scheme to schools, targeting those learners most at risk of educational disadvantage through lack of access to ICT equipment. While available data shows that some schools have concentrated levels of disadvantage it is also the case that other schools may have learners at risk of educational disadvantage among their student cohort. Schools are best placed to identify and address inequalities to ensure those learners most at risk are supported and have access to the appropriate digital technologies required to give them every opportunity to fulfil their educational potential and gain key digital skills as part of their education.

My Department has committed to issuing the funding to schools in Q4 2021. Work is underway to determine the criteria for a scheme that will apply to underpin the allocation of this grant funding.

## State Pensions

114. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans in relation to women who were working in the home for a long time not eligible for certain pension entitlements; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45733/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Subject to the standard qualifying conditions for State Pension (Contributory) also being satisfied, the State pension system currently gives significant recognition to those whose work history includes an extended period of time outside the paid workplace, often to raise families or in a full-time caring role.

This is provided through the award of credits and/or the application of the Homemaker's Scheme (under the Yearly Average method for payment calculation) and/or the application of HomeCaring Periods (under the Aggregated Contribution Method or the interim Total Contributions Approach).

Details of these are –

- Credits – PRSI Credits are awarded to recipients of Carer's Allowance (and Carer's Benefit) where they have an underlying entitlement to credits. Credits are also awarded to workers who take unpaid Carer's Leave from work.

- The Homemaker's Scheme - The scheme, which was introduced with effect from 1994, is designed to help homemakers and carers qualify for State Pension (Contributory). The Scheme, which allows periods caring for children or people with a caring need to be disregarded (from

1994), can have the effect of increasing the Yearly Average.

- HomeCaring Periods – This Scheme makes it easier for a home carer to qualify for a higher rate of State Pension (Contributory). HomeCaring Periods can only be used under the Aggregated Contribution Method (also known as the Interim Total Contributions Approach) of pension calculation. HomeCaring Periods may be awarded for each week not already covered by a paid or credited social insurance contribution.

A policy to introduce the Total Contributions Approach (TCA) to pensions calculation from 2020 was adopted by Government in the National Pensions Framework in 2010. Before this, in January 2018, the Government agreed to a proposal that allows pensioners affected by the 2012 changes in rate bands to have their pension entitlement calculated using an interim “Total Contributions Approach” (also called the Aggregated Contribution Method) which includes up to 20 years of the newly introduced HomeCaring periods. The provision for the HomeCaring Periods Scheme fundamentally changed the entitlement of many who spent time out of the workforce caring for others. For the first time, home caring periods prior to 1994 were acknowledged. Under the interim TCA, those who have a 40 year record of paid and credited social insurance contributions, subject to a maximum of 20 years of credits/homecaring periods, qualify for a maximum contributory pension where they satisfy the other qualifying conditions for the scheme.

Since April 2019, all new State (Contributory) Pension applications are assessed under all possible rate calculation methods, including the Yearly Average and the interim Total Contributions Approach, with the most beneficial rate paid to the pensioner. The elements which make up each method are set out in legislation.

The Pensions Commission was established in November 2020 to examine sustainability and eligibility issues with the State Pension and the Social Insurance Fund, in fulfilment of a Programme for Government commitment. Its terms of reference included consideration of how long-term carers could be accommodated in the pension system.

The Commission has now concluded its work and has submitted its final report to me. The report itself is extremely detailed, running to several hundred pages, and covers a range of complex matters in relation to the Pensions system which will require very careful consideration.

It should be noted that if a person does not satisfy the conditionality to qualify for State Pension (Contributory), s/he may qualify for the means-tested State Pension (Non-Contributory), the maximum rate of which is over 95% that of the maximum rate of the State Pension (Contributory). Alternatively, if his/her spouse is a State pensioner and has significant household means, his/her most beneficial payment may be an Increase for a Qualified Adult, based on his/her personal means, and amounting to up to 90% of a full contributory pension.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## **Cybersecurity Policy**

115. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her Department’s IT infrastructure is monitored for security breaches on a 24/7 basis; the guidance provided from Government on same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45318/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department implements a security-by-design and defence-in-depth approach to cyber security and has 24/7 cyber defence systems in place that react to any threat to its systems in the event of a cyber incident

or security breach. My Department also works closely with the National Cyber Security Centre and the Office of the Government CIO to ensure that best practice principles are followed with regard to ICT security.

### **Community Employment Schemes**

116. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she is currently considering putting a further extension in place for participants on community employment and Tús schemes; and her views on the fact that there are currently very limited employment opportunities for participants to move on to and also limited opportunities for sponsor groups to recruit participants. [45327/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** Community Employment (CE) is an active labour market programme providing 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. Tús is a community work placement initiative providing more short-term work opportunities for people who have been unemployed over a year to support their return to employment.

As the Deputy is aware, as with other sectors of society, CE and Tús schemes were impacted by the public health restrictions introduced since the onset of COVID-19. My priority was to ensure CE and Tús schemes and participants were fully supported during this period. While some schemes were able to maintain services while complying with public health restrictions, this was not always the case. In both scenarios, CE and Tús participants, whose contracts were due to end during periods of public health restrictions, had their contracts extended on a number of occasions, most recently up to end October 2021.

With the successful roll-out of the vaccine programme and in line with Government's plans for the full re-opening of the economy, under 'Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting' my priority and the priority of the Department is to have all CE and Tús schemes back providing normal services and supports to unemployed participants while delivering vital services to local communities.

As part of this return to normal operations, a phased and planned schedule of exits for CE and Tús participants, some of whose contracts have been extended for up to one year, will commence in November 2021. I can reassure the Deputy that the exits will be carried out in a phased basis between November and May 2022. This means that many participants' contracts will be extended beyond the end of October.

These final contract extensions will provide CE and Tús participants with an opportunity to benefit from further work experience on CE and Tús and also for CE participants to complete any outstanding training. The coordinated and phased exit approach will also support the recruitment of new CE and Tús participants while ensuring the ongoing delivery of important local community services.

I note the concern raised in relation to employment opportunities and recruitment of participants. However, it should be noted that 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 finish on CE and Tús, over the coming months.

These additional resources will be central to meeting the increased demand for employment

services, given the impact of the pandemic on employment including new candidate referrals to fill CE and Tús vacancies. I anticipate that with the full re-opening of the economy we will be able to restore scheme participant levels, in addition to new places being assigned to a number of CE and Tús schemes, delivering on a key commitment under Pathways to Work.

CE sponsoring authorities and Tús implementing bodies are encouraged by my Department to continue to promote the benefits of CE and Tús in their local communities. Jobseekers interested in participating on CE or Tús can also contact a case officer in their local Intreo Centre who will refer those eligible onto local CE or Tús programmes.

CE sponsoring authorities also advertise their vacancies on [www.jobsireland.ie](http://www.jobsireland.ie), the Department's online job advertising and recruitment service for jobseekers and employers.

In order to ensure that all employment and activation programmes have the best outcome for participants, CE and Tús will continue to be made available to support those who are long term unemployed and furthest removed from the labour market, including those whose employment has been adversely affected by the COVID-19 emergency.

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

117. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Social Protection the steps taken by her Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within her Department who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; her plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45375/21]

**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.

My Department acted early in the pandemic to provide secure remote access to 100% of its staff, and this significantly changed how staff are working.

Early in the pandemic, the contract provider in place for my Department was unable to procure laptops to meet the Department's demand and the Department issued a new tender in line with procurement guidelines for another provider.

As such, all relevant DSP staff can access appropriate DSP systems securely on the Department's IT network to carry out the duties of their role and access to video conferencing.

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 was withdrawn. This means that people could 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.

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.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

118. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Social Protection the steps taken by agencies under the remit of her Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within these agencies who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; if there are plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45392/21]

**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.

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 was withdrawn. This means that people could 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.

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.

The position in relation to the relevant bodies under the aegis of my Department is as follows:

**Citizens Information Board (CIB):** During the pandemic period, all employees of CIB worked remotely from home. In line with the DPER approach to supporting blended working in the public service, CIB has committed to developing a remote working policy in line with central arrangements.

Pensions Authority: All Pensions Authority employees continue to work primarily from home pending further guidance from DPER regarding a return to office. Currently all employees have full remote access to the Authority's data systems and all have access for video conferencing and online working. 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.

### **Social Welfare Payments**

119. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision will be made on a working family payment application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45465/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Working Family Payment (WFP) is an income tested in-work payment which provides additional financial support to employees on low earnings with children. Income that is assessable for WFP includes an applicant's and their spouse's average net weekly assessable weekly earnings from employment, plus any other household income such as income from self employment, other social protection payments etc.

An application for WFP was received from the person concerned on 20 July 2021.

The Department wrote to the person concerned on 13 August 2021, to request further employment related information and documentary evidence. The requested information was not provided and the claim was refused on 04 September 2021.

The person concerned then submitted all required documentation via email on 05 September 2021. On receipt of the requested information from the person concerned, a review took place on 17 September 2021.

Following this review, the application was disallowed on the grounds that the weekly family income is not less than the prescribed income level for their family size.

The person concerned was notified of this revised decision in writing on 17 September 2021, and of the right of review and appeal.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Banking Sector**

120. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the further action that has been taken to address banking charges on overseas pensions; if elimination of charges on those receiving their pensions into bank accounts in Canada and the USA has been extended to all recipients; if there are intentions to refund the charges which have been made as a result of the making of all social protection payments through a bank (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45480/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Since the Deputy last raised this matter in June, my Department has introduced further payment system changes to cater for some Canadian pensioners whose payments were being processed by more than one correspondent bank in Canada.

As previously stated, EFT payments to markets outside of Ireland where the sending bank is not a member of the domestic clearing system, such as the US or Canada, are processed as international cross border payments, also known as international wire transfers. Processing such payments as international wire transfers ensures that the sending bank complies with its national and international Anti Money Laundering (AML) and Counter Terrorist Financing (CTF) obligations.

In order to effect these international wire transfers in markets such as the US and Canada, the services of a correspondent bank - effectively an intermediary bank - are necessary where the sending bank is not a member of the local bank clearing system. This is the industry standard approach.

Correspondent banks will deduct charges from the payment amount to compensate for the cost of processing the payment and discharging their AML and CTF obligations.

Further process changes were implemented by my Department to ensure that all Irish Social Welfare payments to Canadian residents are now only handled by a single correspondent bank, thus limiting their potential exposure to foreign bank fees. Issues arising from clearing payments through the Canadian banking system are unique.

There has been no requirement to make additional payment process changes for other countries since June.

The Department continues to advise customers to seek improved fee arrangements from their own bank or with another financial institution and continues to provide the most up to date information it has on bank fees for pensioners living in Canada.

Many bank customers in both Canada and the United States can avail of reduced bank fees on pension payments, depending on the financial institution that they bank with and the type of account they hold. The Department of Social Protection is aware of a number of pensioners in both the United States and Canada who do not incur any bank charges due to the arrangements they have made with their own financial institutions.

Ultimately, my Department has no control over the fees charged by foreign banks on their own customers.

## **Parental Leave**

121. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of parents that have taken parent's leave and benefit since the scheme was extended from two to five weeks; and the uptake of parent's benefit and leave since January 2021 to date. [45474/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The number of parents who have applied for parents benefit since it was extended from two to five weeks in April 2021 to date (15th Sept) is 28,073.

The total number that have applied since January 2021 to date (15th Sept) is 35,928.

It should be noted that while a claim may be awarded in one month, the leave and benefit could be availed of at a different time, or over a period of months, as it is available to use one week at a time.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

## **State Pensions**

122. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on a chief appeals officer review of the decision on a State pension (contributory) backdating appeal in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45617/21]

**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 available evidence, disallowed the appeal of the person concerned by way of a summary decision.

Under social welfare legislation the decision of the Appeals Officer is generally final and conclusive and may only be reviewed by the Appeals Officer in the light of new evidence or new facts. Following the submission of additional evidence, the Appeals Officer has undertaken a review of the decision in this case under Section 317 of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 which provides for a review of the decision in the light of new evidence or new facts. It is envisaged that the outcome of the review will be provided to the person concerned in the very near future.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions on social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## **Social Welfare Appeals**

123. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on the review of further information submitted for a review of a decision on a carer's allowance appeal by a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45618/21]

**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.

It is a condition for receipt of CA that the applicant's means are less than the statutory limit which in this case is €222.60 weekly.

Means are any income belonging to the carer and their spouse, civil partner, or cohabitant, property, (except their own home) or an asset that could bring in money or provide them with an income, for example occupational pensions, or pensions or benefits from another country.

The evidence before the deciding officer included a valuation of a second property, capital and a small farm income. Following the means calculations and relevant disregards the person concerned was found to have means in excess of the statutory means limit of €222.60.

The application for CA was accordingly disallowed as his means were determined to exceed the statutory limit. The person concerned was notified on 28 April 2021 of this decision, the reason for it and his right of review and appeal.

The person concerned appealed this decision to the Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO) on 14 May 2021.

The outcome of the appeal is that it was disallowed and the original decision still stands.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Employment Schemes**

124. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Social Protection the amount the operation of JobPath has cost in each of the years 2016 to 2020, in tabular form; if there has been an analysis of its efficacy, namely results and the number of persons successfully re-entering the workforce; and if a review of the programme has been considered in view of these findings. [45625/21]

125. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Social Protection the criteria in place for determining eligibility to JobPath; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45628/21]

126. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Social Protection the details of the decision-making process that takes place to determine if a person repeats the JobPath process or if they return to jobseeker's allowance. [45629/21]

127. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Social Protection the actions taken regarding the unspent funding that does not get allocated to applicants via the JobPath scheme; if it is returned to her Department; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45630/21]

128. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Social Protection the oversight systems in place to evaluate the performance of the JobPath; if it has annual figures of the proportion of applicants versus those who successfully regain employment or any other key performance indicator analysis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45631/21]

129. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Social Protection the upper limit of financial support for training available to a person on JobPath versus a person on social welfare; if she will provide a comparative analysis and justification of these figures; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45632/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 124 to 129, inclusive, together.

JobPath provides employment assistance and advice to the long-term unemployed on behalf of my Department. JobPath service providers are paid based on performance and, except for the initial registration fee, payments are made only when a client has achieved sustained employment that is verified by the Department and therefore, due to the payment model, there are no unspent funds. The initial set-up costs and the day to day running costs are borne by the service providers.

The final overall cost of JobPath will be determined by the number of people who engage with the service and the number who secure sustainable jobs. The roll out of JobPath began in 2015 and the yearly expenditure 2016 - 2020 is as set out in the table below. It should be noted that this is gross expenditure and does not consider the savings made in welfare payments for those who secured sustained employment.

Between July 2015 and the end of July 2021 some 312,966 jobseekers had commenced their engagement period with the JobPath service and in the same period, 70,740 jobseekers had commenced employment during their engagement period with JobPath.

**See Table 2 for annual breakdown.**

The OECD worked with my Department to measure the effectiveness of JobPath and the econometric review of JobPath, published by my Department in 2019, noted that in 2018 the weekly employment earnings of people who secured employment with the JobPath service are 17% higher than the weekly employment earnings of people who secured employment without the support of JobPath. Taken with the 26% improvement in employment outcomes in the same period, it means the overall positive employment/earnings impact is 37% in 2018 for those who are supported by the JobPath service. These findings indicate that jobseekers who engage with JobPath are more likely to get a positive employment outcome than those jobseekers who aren't supported by the service.

Additionally, the Comptroller and Auditor General produced a detailed report examining how the service was governed and found that the JobPath service was delivering in accordance with all aspects of the contract with my Department.

All jobseekers on the Live Register must be capable of; available for and actively seeking full time employment, they are also required to engage with the Department's employment services. The Social Welfare (Consolidated) Act 2005, as amended, specifies that participation is mandatory. Therefore, jobseekers in receipt of a jobseeker's payment are required to engage with the Department's employment services whether the service is provided internally by an Intreo case officer or, externally by any of the Department's contracted service providers.

All jobseekers over one year on the Live Register are eligible for selection to one of the contracted public employment services, including the JobPath employment service. Selection for referral to the JobPath employment service is by means of random selection. Protocols for referral to JobPath currently preclude the selection of anyone who has already completed 2 x 52 weeks on the JobPath programme or any jobseeker who completed the programme within the previous 4 months. A person who has completed a year with the JobPath service; continues to meet the criteria for long term unemployment and if they are not engaged in other employment supports and services becomes eligible for selection for a second period of engagement with the JobPath service after 4 months.

JobPath providers have their own discretionary funds available to pay for training or other interventions; the decision to approve a request for funding is at the discretion of the JobPath provider. They will consider the duration, cost and relevance to the customer's job goal preferences. The prevalence of employment opportunities in the sector will also be considered along with the likelihood that the customer secures full-time employment upon completion of the course.

Several courses are provided in-house while others are provided by specialist training providers including the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). There are no barriers to any participants pursuing training, including further education and training courses, provided they are relevant to their agreed personal progression plan.

All persons referred to the JobPath service are in receipt of a social welfare payment (Jobseeker's payment) and therefore a comparative analysis between those engaged with JobPath and those in receipt of other social welfare payments is not available. My Department provides a wide range of educational and training supports to customers. Should the Deputy require additional and specific information on these supports I would be happy to provide it.

**Table 1 : JobPath Expenditure 2016-2020**

Year	Total Expenditure €
2016	€ 25.2m
2017	€ 57.4m
2018	€ 71.7m
2019	€ 58.6m
2020	€ 36.2m
Total Cost 2016-2020	€249.1m

**Table 2 : Annual breakdown of referral numbers and job starts**

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-22\_pq12422092021\_en.docx ">referral numbers and job starts </a>]

*Question No. 125 answered with Question No. 124.*

*Question No. 126 answered with Question No. 124.*

*Question No. 127 answered with Question No. 124.*

*Question No. 128 answered with Question No. 124.*

*Question No. 129 answered with Question No. 124.*

### **Community Employment Schemes**

130. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a community employment placement will be extended in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45635/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** The aim of the Community Employment ( CE ) programme is to enhance the employability of disadvantaged and unemployed people by providing work experience and training opportunities for them within their communities. Participation limits on these schemes are necessary to allow for the maximum utilisation of places amongst qualifying persons. It is important to note that participation is intended to be for a temporary fixed term and the positions offered are not full-time sustainable jobs. Instead, the placements are designed to break the cycle of unemployment and maintain work readiness, thereby improving a person's opportunities of returning to the open labour market.

In general, placements for new entrants aged between 21 and 55 years are for one year. Those participants who are working towards a Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) major award can seek to extend their participation on CE by up to two years to enable them to reach the required standard of qualification. Participants aged 55 years or older can remain on CE for three years and do not have to work towards a QQI major award. In both instances, a maximum of three consecutive year's participation is permissible. A person may re-qualify for CE after a 12 month break once they satisfy the qualifying conditions. An overall lifetime limit of six years applies to all CE participants (seven years for those on a disability payment).

As the person concerned has now been on CE for in excess of 3 consecutive years, ( their time having been extended due to the Covid 19 Pandemic ) their placement will now finish on 5th November 2021. The person concerned may re-qualify for CE after a 12 month break subject to satisfying the qualifying conditions.

As is always the case, where a CE participant finishes up on their CE scheme without completing the training outlined in their Individual Learning Plan and if, unfortunately, they remain unemployed, they may continue their development through a range of training supports provided by my Department such as the Training Support Grant and the Back to Education Allowance. Department case officers are available to engage with former CE participants to discuss the available options and to ensure that the benefits and experience received during their time on CE are maximised.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Cybersecurity Policy**

131. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his Department's IT infrastructure is monitored for security breaches on a 24/7 basis; the guidance provided from Government on same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45305/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** ICT services are provided to my 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. 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.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

132. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the steps taken by his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within his Department who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; his plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45362/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** 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 my Department's blended working policy, that will be tailored to the specific requirements of my Department. My Department operates a 'single device policy'. Each member of our staff is provided with a laptop computer to facilitate remote and office working utilising the IT services/shared networks provided by the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO).

### **Flexible Work Practices**

133. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the steps taken by agencies under the remit of his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within these agencies who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; if there are plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45379/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I wish to inform the Deputy that my officials have asked the relevant agencies to respond to you directly on this matter.

### **Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries**

134. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the status of any investigations into the leak regarding the report on the mother and baby homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45446/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Secretary General of the Department of An Taoiseach is leading the investigation into this matter. As part of the process, he has been tasked with examining the broader issue of unauthorised dissemination of documentation and other information related to the work of the Cabinet and its sub-committees.

This matter continues to be pursued as the leaking of details from the Commission’s report before its publication was unacceptable and added to the distress to survivors. My Department has provided input to assist the Secretary General with his investigation. Although it is not yet possible to say when the investigation will be completed, I can assure the Deputy that its outcome will be publicised.

### **Childcare Services**

135. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the proposals he has to improve childcare provision under the national childcare scheme for children whose parents are not working or in education or training; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45462/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The National Childcare Scheme provides financial support to help parents to meet the cost of childcare and to support better outcomes for children. The schemes objectives are to promote (i) a reduction in child poverty, (ii) positive child development outcomes, (iii) labour market activation and (iv) improved quality.

The NCS is designed to be highly inclusive and to meet the needs of those families who need it the most. The NCS is based on the principle of progressive universalism and has regard to the best interests of children.

By making this fundamental shift away from the legacy schemes where subsidies are grounded in medical card and social protection entitlements, and by tangibly reducing the cost of quality childcare for thousands of families, the NCS aims to improve children’s outcomes, improve labour market participation and reduce child poverty. It is a central policy component

of the NCS to poverty proof and assist people in exiting the poverty trap.

Within this framework, an income-related subsidy is payable for children up to 15 years of age. The subsidy level is determined by the family's income and the child's age. The number of hours subsidised is determined by the parent's employment or education arrangements.

The scheme is also built to ensure that families are supported to access a minimum level of early learning and childcare provision to support positive child outcomes.

Importantly, the evidence also shows that these benefits are, in most cases, realised with part-time participation. On this basis, 20 hours are available all year round for children who have not started school, and in non-term time for school age children, regardless of whether the parents or guardians are in work or study.

During term time, the child's development needs are generally met through school participation.

Households on incomes of less than €26,000 NET can access full subsidies of up to €225 per child, per week, covering up to 45 hours week. To access 45 hours rather than 20 hours, the parent must be in some type of employment or be engaged in training.

The definition of work or study is broad, covering all forms of work or study arrangements: full-time, part-time, week-on/week-off and zero hour contracts. Moreover, the minimum hours required to engage in work or study to qualify for up to 45 hours per week is very low – at just two hours per week. In this way, the NCS encourages parents to exit poverty and deliver better outcomes for their children.

Underpinned by this approach is strong evidence that shows how growing up in poverty negatively impacts on child outcomes. Taking up work or engaging in training, even a very low number of hours, is key to enabling families to break that cycle and that is what the NCS is designed in part to support.

It also reflects the need to ensure that our systems recognise the critical role of family in children's lives. Particularly where those families are available to care for their children.

For children living in exceptional circumstances of disadvantage or need, the NCS sponsorship arrangement is designed so that they can access free early learning and care or school age childcare for longer or full time hours where required.

The DCEDIY is committed to keeping the scheme under review and to assess whether it is meeting its objectives. I have contracted Frontier Economics to undertake a review of the National Childcare Scheme in line with Section 26 of the Childcare Support Act.

Variations on the concept of a work/study test is widely used around the world and I have also requested that Frontier review the usage and evidence of efficacy of this approach in other countries.

This work is due to be finalised in the final quarter of this year and will inform in an evidence based manner the future development of the scheme.

## **International Protection**

136. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of persons that were deemed adults by the International Protection

Office and placed into direct provision following the assessments; and the number that were deemed minors and placed in the care of Tusla. [45467/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Department of Justice has the remit for immigration and international protection processes and it makes the final decision as to whether someone will be considered as a minor during their application for international protection. Where referrals are made to Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, by International Protection Office (formerly ORAC) and by the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB), Tusla’s role is to determine if the person is deemed to be eligible for the provision of services under the Child Care Act 1991

The below table demonstrates the number of eligibility assessments undertaken by Tusla from 2016 to end 2020.

YEAR	No. of assessments for eligibility to receive services under the Child Care Act 1991, as amended	Deemed ineligible for services under the Act	Deemed eligible for services under the Act	Other
2016	35 (33 actual)	24	9	2 (went missing before assessments)
2017	25	12	13	
2018	18	9	9	
2019	24	15	9	
2020	16 (15 actual)	7	8	1 (aged-out of care before assessment)

Tusla provides specialist services for separated children seeking international protection (SCSIP) who arrive via two different routes. Applicants who present at ports and other points of entry and declare themselves to be children and are referred by GNIB and the IPO. A smaller number of separated children, agreed to be children before they arrive in Ireland under an organised refugee programme

Between 2016 and 2020 a total of 438 separated children seeking asylum came into the care of Tusla’s Separated Children’s Team.

In 2020 there was 80 referrals to Tusla’s Separated Children’s Team. This was 104 (56%) fewer than the 184 referrals in 2019 and the lowest number of referrals since 2012 (71).

At the end of July 2021 Tusla reported 54 separated children seeking international protection in its care.

### Grant Payments

137. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will consider extending the ECCE grant for a person (details supplied) in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45470/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme is a universal free two-year pre-school programme available to all children within the eligible age range.

As the child to which the Deputy refers has not availed of any ECCE time in 2019 or 2020, and the child will not have reached 6 years before starting primary school in September 2022 I will grant an exemption in this case.

The child will be eligible to attend ECCE from September 2021 to June 2022. My Depart-

ment will notify Pobal, who are the administrators of the ECCE programme, of this decision.

### **Disability Services**

138. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth his plans to provide supports and recreation centres for families with autism and other such spectrums; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45477/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** I wish to advise the Deputy that I am not in a position to comment on these matters which are more appropriate for the attention of my Cabinet colleagues, the Minister for Health and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

### **Assisted Decision-Making**

139. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the status of the Bill to amend the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015; the other technical issues that have been resolved other than the repeal of the Marriage of Lunatics Act 1811 to date; and the actions currently being taken by his Department apart from the development of the decision support service. [45509/21]

**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. An inter-departmental steering group is meeting regularly to prepare for commencement of the Act.

Amendments are required to the 2015 Act before full commencement can take place. Work is actively underway on an Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Bill, which will address a number of issues required to streamline processes and improve safeguards for those who will rely on the provisions of the Act. I expect to be in a position to publish a Bill by year-end, and to see it enacted next year.

### **Legislative Programme**

140. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the status of the Disability (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2019 which provides for the monitoring structures that will apply to the implementation of the UNCRPD. [45510/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** The Disability (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2016 lapsed with the dissolution

of the last Dáil.

The Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Bill is being used to advance a number of legislative provisions required by the UNCRPD that were previously included in the Disability (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2016.

This 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. It also includes measures to bolster the public sector obligation to lead on providing pathways to work for people with disabilities, by doubling the amount of people with disabilities to be employed by public bodies from 3% to 6% by 2024.

Work is actively taking place on the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Bill, which is expected to be published by year-end. The aim is that it will be enacted next year.

### **Disability Services**

141. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the distinction that is being made in his policy work between organisations for persons with a disability and disability representative organisations. [45511/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** 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.

The UNCRPD requires State parties to actively involve people with disabilities in policy development (Articles 4.3 and 33.3). The UN Committee has issued guidance on these articles through General Comment No 7. This guidance makes a distinction between organisations ‘for’ people with disabilities and organisations ‘of’ people with disabilities (also called disabled persons organisation or DPOs). The UN Committee recommends that organisations run by people with disabilities (and not for them or advocating on their behalf) are prioritised for consultation.

As a first step towards full implementation of UNCRPD requirements on consultation, my Department has begun the process of building and supporting the consultation framework for involving people with disabilities in the policy development process.

My Department has funded the development of a Participation and Consultation Network to build capacity within the disability community so that people with disabilities and their representative organisations can fully participate in policy-making. The Network was formed in late 2020.

The Network has over 100 members with funding provided to an organising member and four grant funded members. Members include disability organisations, disabled peoples organisations, individuals with disabilities and family members and support groups. They represent a wide and diverse set of experiences of disabilities which ensures a huge amount of knowledge

and experience is available.

The expression of interest call for members of the Network specifically invited DPOs to apply. Two of the grant funded members are DPOs (AsIAM and the Coalition of Disabled Persons Organisations (DPO Coalition)). The DPO Coalition are themselves a grouping of DPOs whose own membership ensures that the Network includes the voices of many of Ireland's DPOs. The Network is the first time that the voice of DPOs has been formally included at a national level. The Network has already been formally consulted on the UNCRPD State Report and it is currently completing a programme of work establishing its own internal structures and practices, which will allow it to carry out its work effectively.

In addition to the Network, the Disability Stakeholder Group is the existing mechanism for monitoring the National Disability Inclusion Strategy. It is a voluntary group of 24 individuals with expertise and lived experience of disability. A recent call for new members included, for the first time, an invitation for DPOs to apply, alongside individuals, persons with live experience, academics or professionals, and advocacy type organisations. Applications to sit on the Group are currently being considered.

### **International Agreements**

142. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 442 of 20 January 2021 and 179 of 12 May 2021, the exact outstanding issues that need to be resolved by the Department of Justice before the State can proceed to ratify the Second Optional Protocol on the UNCRC which includes the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45548/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** Significant work was carried out prior to my appointment as Minister to ensure the ratification of the Second Optional Protocol. Assessment carried out previously concluded that the enactment of Sexual Offences Act 2017 and Criminal Justice (Victims of Crimes Act 2017) removed the main hurdles for ratification.

As outlined in my previous reply on this matter, my Department subsequently 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 main outstanding issues relate to determining what if any 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 in line with Article 3.1 of the Protocol.

There is close engagement between the Department of Justice and my Department and once this process is concluded the next step will involve the development of measures that might be necessary to enable ratification.

### **Departmental Funding**

143. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the projects or grantees in his recently announced €1 million funding for children's services within the What Works initiative that will be targeted directly at benefiting the lives of children with disabilities. [45624/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** My Department has allocated funding under the What Works initiative, funded through Dormant Accounts, for children's services under three funding initiatives in 2021: the What Works Training Fund, the Learning Together Fund, and the Children and Youth Digital Solutions Fund.

The What Works Training Fund is now open for applications and will support community and voluntary organisations who are members of the Tusla Child and Family Support Networks (CFSNs) and provide services to children, young people and families in areas of disadvantage, to assist in meeting their training needs.

The Learning Together Fund was designed to support community and voluntary organisations or networks of statutory and non-government organisations, to promote increased understanding and use of evidence informed approaches to prevention and early intervention services for children, young people and their families.

Finally, the Children and Youth Digital Solutions Fund is a one year fund created by Rethink Ireland and funded by my Department.

Under the Children and Youth Digital Solutions Fund, €50,000 was awarded to Dyspraxia/DCD Ireland for their Partnering for Occupational Therapy Telehealth Services (POTTS) project, in addition to €10,000 in non-financial supports and support through the Rethink Ireland Accelerator Programme which is a minimum of five days of capacity building workshops.

This project addresses waiting times for an initial Occupation Health assessment of children. The project works with supervised Occupational Therapy students from the University of Limerick to deliver one to one and group therapy interventions to children and young people. This funding will provide support to more children across the country awaiting clinical assessments and it also aims to produce a template that can be used by other services to provide clinical telehealth services to their users.

Also under the Children and Youth Digital Solutions Fund, Foróige received a similar award for their VRóige project. This project aims to address social isolation and developmental opportunities for young people who are hard to reach, such as those living rurally, with disabilities, suffering with social anxiety, young carers or those in hospital. Using immersive technology, this project addresses social isolation by connecting them to Foróige programmes, professional youth workers, trained volunteers and like-minded peers.

Through the What Works Learning Together Fund, €4,510 has been allocated to St. Gabriel's Foundation for its Behavioural Support Programme. This programme works with children presenting with complex disabilities and severe behavioural challenges along with their families in a family centred practice model of service delivery. The money awarded to St. Gabriel's is intended to fund the upskilling of Therapy Assistants. This coaching is aimed at helping to maintain a calm home for the family as a whole and vastly improving the child's ability to participate in school activities and positively engage with peers and school staff alike. The overall positive impact is reducing the need for crisis intervention and helps to delay and prevent the ultimate need for long term residential care in some cases.

Additionally, Ballincollig Family Resource Centre Ltd was awarded €10,000. This grant

will go towards its Ballincollig ASD Community Response Capacity Building Network which provides Parents Plus Special Needs Programme Training to a network of front-line support workers. These front-line workers include childcare workers, youth workers and family support workers who provide parental support for children with ASD in the Ballincollig community. The funding is intended to also allow 20 frontline support workers to participate in a bespoke foundational program delivered on Autism Spectrum Disorders.

A further €20,000 has been allocated to the South West Inner City Network (SWICN) to fund its #HeadStr8 programme. This programme is a collaborative project to respond to the need for a nurturing trauma informed approach to services in Dublin 8. Their services aim to support a wide range of young people and their families, including young people with mental health issues and co-occurring disabilities.

### **Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries**

144. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if a subject access request from survivors seeking personal information from the archive of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes will be facilitated without the requirement for a nominated general practitioner; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45701/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Currently, under Data Protection Regulations, a data controller who is not a health practitioner is required to consult with an appropriate health practitioner before supplying any health data to the data subject concerned. My Department, as a data controller, must apply the Regulations when records contain health data. The Regulations do not enable the exercise of any discretion by the data controller and require consultation with an appropriate health practitioner in all cases.

What this means in practice, for the moment, is that where health data is included in the data due to be provided to a data subject, my Department is releasing all other non-health related information in the first instance, but, to give effect to the Regulations, is asking the requestor for the details of their health practitioner in order to consult him/her, before releasing the health data. Once the requestor’s health practitioner has reviewed the health data and has determined that it can be released, my Department will release the personal data in question to the requestor. My Department has already done this for a number of requestors.

I am not satisfied with this requirement and am working in conjunction with the Minister for Health, to amend the regulations.

In the interim, and in order to facilitate the timely release of information, my Department is also making requestors aware that Freedom of Information legislation, which is separate to the General Data Protection Regulation, provides an alternative route or additional route by which they may also access the health data concerned. Under that legislation, the involvement of a health professional in relation to releasing health records is discretionary rather than mandatory.

My Department is seeking to ensure that individuals are aware that it is open to them to make a request under both GDPR and FOI if that is their wish and my Department provides health data to individuals in accordance with each legislative framework.

### **Asylum Seekers**

145. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the postnatal supports that are available to asylum seekers who give birth in Ireland; the policy that is currently available for the postnatal care of both asylum seeker mothers and their babies in direct provision centres or hotel accommodation; if his attention has been drawn to the particular case of a woman (details supplied) who was transferred to another centre with a newborn baby; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45728/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I am aware of the particular case referred to by the Deputy. It is my policy to move families out of emergency accommodation into dedicated International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) centres as soon as possible. In this particular case, I am advised by IPAS officials that they were in contact with the mother and her representatives to assure her that ongoing supports would be available to her and her baby at her new accommodation centre.

Dedicated IPAS accommodation centres are generally better equipped to meet the needs of applicants and their families than temporary emergency centres and employ appropriately trained staff more familiar and experienced with providing services to protection applicants. I am conscious, however, of the need to ensure the welfare of families living in IPAS accommodation.

As the Deputy may be aware, the provision of all medical services, including post-natal care are mainstreamed through the HSE. Any International Protection applicant accommodated in IPAS accommodation is entitled to a medical card and can access medical care through the GP referral process or emergency services. I’m also advised that an official from the HSE Social Inclusion Department works full time with the IPAS Resident Welfare Team to assist IPAS in its efforts to ensure residents are able to access whatever health services they may require during their time in IPAS accommodation.

I trust that this information is of assistance to the Deputy.

### **Childcare Services**

146. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will address the anomaly whereby parents who do not work or study cannot access the national childcare subsidy for after-school care during term-time; if he has carried out a poverty impact analysis on the new national childcare scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45730/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The National Childcare Scheme provides financial support to help parents to meet the cost of childcare and to support better outcomes for children. The schemes objectives are to promote (i) a reduction in child poverty, (ii) positive child development outcomes, (iii) labour market activation and (iv) improved quality.

The NCS is designed to be highly inclusive and to meet the needs of those families who need it the most. The NCS is based on the principle of progressive universalism and has regard to the best interests of children.

By making this fundamental shift away from the legacy schemes where subsidies are grounded in medical card and social protection entitlements, and by tangibly reducing the cost of quality childcare for thousands of families, the NCS aims to improve children’s outcomes, improve labour market participation and reduce child poverty. It is a central policy component of the NCS to poverty proof and assist people in exiting the poverty trap.

Within this framework, an income-related subsidy is payable for children up to 15 years of age. The subsidy level is determined by the family's income and the child's age. The number of hours subsidised is determined by the parent's employment or education arrangements.

The scheme is also built to ensure that families are supported to access a minimum level of early learning and childcare provision to support positive child outcomes.

During term time, the child's development needs are generally met through school participation.

Households on incomes of less than €26,000 NET can access full subsidies of up to €225 per child, per week, covering up to 45 hours week. To access 45 hours rather than 20 hours, the parent must be in some type of employment or be engaged in training.

The definition of work or study is broad, covering all forms of work or study arrangements: full-time, part-time, week-on/week-off and zero hour contracts. Moreover, the minimum hours required to engage in work or study to qualify for up to 45 hours per week is very low – at just two hours per week. In this way, the NCS encourages parents to exit poverty and deliver better outcomes for their children.

Underpinned by this approach is strong evidence that shows how growing up in poverty negatively impacts on child outcomes. Taking up work or engaging in training, even a very low number of hours, is key to enabling families to break that cycle and that is what the NCS is designed in part to support.

It also reflects the need to ensure that our systems recognise the critical role of family in children's lives. Particularly where those families are available to care for their children.

Alleviation of poverty was at the heart of the development of the scheme. Much of the research concentrated on the direct impact it would have on low income households.

The 2016 policy paper which formed the basis for the National Childcare undertook an extensive analysis of the how the scheme would impact this in poverty and in low income households. It highlighted the dangers of poverty traps in childcare schemes, particularly where there is a risk of steep rises in childcare costs where a parent returns to work. Such traps undermine the incentive to take-up or increase employment. Therefore the NCS was designed to counteract this disincentive effect, through a smooth taper rate across the income assessed subsidies, and also through a transition from unemployment to work/study which increases the number of hours available.

The policy was informed by national and international evidence and advocacy on measures to prevent poverty (including inter-generational poverty). The policy sought to strike the right balance between enabling early learning and care services or indeed school age childcare services, to meet the needs of children in terms of their positive development and tackling a significant contributor to poverty and poorer outcomes for children of non-work households.

There is strong evidence that growing up in poverty has negative impacts on child outcomes. For example, according to the ESRI study *Understanding Childhood Deprivation in Ireland* (Watson et al., 2012), the longer-term impacts of poverty among children include lower levels of educational achievement, emotional and behavioural problems, and poorer health outcomes.

The research evidence suggests that parental employment is a key factor in protecting children from poverty and deprivation. The ESRI / Watson study concluded that parental unemployment is a significant risk factor in determining deprivation rates among children, with particularly high deprivation rates where a parent has never worked, or in lone parent households,

or where the mother has no educational qualifications.

Childcare costs in Ireland (prior to the NCS) have been found to be a significant factor in contributing to low levels of participation in employment, education and training for mothers, particularly for lone parents. The NCS makes childcare much more affordable, and in some instances free to parents.

Research by Melhuish et al. (2015) and Sylva et al (2004), in the NCS policy paper indicates that positive children's outcomes are for the most part met through part-time participation. This research has been used internationally in the design of various interventions. (DCEDIY is extremely grateful to have one of those authors, Prof Melhuish from Oxford University, on the Funding Model Expert Group.)

Melhuish and Sylva's research points to the fact that young children do not need to be in early learning and care for full time hours to meet their child development needs. As such, many schemes around the world are based on 15 to 20 hours per week. In Ireland's case, the State is now providing two years of free pre-school to all children before they start school for 15 hours per week. The NCS provides 20 hours of subsidised early learning and care per week where a parent is available at home, for children aged from six months, or 20 hours of school age childcare in non- term/ non ECCE time.

The OECD's study Faces of Joblessness in Ireland, which included an ex ante analysis of the impact of the National Childcare Scheme, stressed the impact of work incentives on joblessness. It reported positively on the likely impact of the NCS.

Whilst recognising these general principles, for children living in exceptional circumstances of disadvantage or need, the NCS sponsorship arrangement is designed so that they can access free early learning and care or school age childcare for longer or full time hours where required.

The DCEDIY is committed to keeping the scheme under review and to assess whether it is meeting its objectives. I have contracted Frontier Economics to undertake a review of the National Childcare Scheme in line with Section 26 of the Childcare Support Act.

Variations on the concept of a work/study test is widely used around the world and I have also requested that Frontier review the usage and evidence of efficacy of this approach in other countries.

This work is due to be finalised in the final quarter of this year and will inform in an evidence based manner the future development of the scheme.

### **Third Level Education**

147. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the steps he will take to ensure that in-person lectures at a university (details supplied) recommence in alignment with other third-level institutions. [45287/21]

148. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will engage with the provost of a university (details supplied) to ensure that in-person lectures at the college recommence in a similar way to other third-level institutions. [45288/21]

153. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he has engaged with representatives from a university (details

supplied) on its decision to delay the return of in-person learning; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45466/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 147, 148 and 153 together.

Following Government approval, I published A Safe Return: Plan for a safe return to on-site Further and Higher Education and Research in 2021/22 on 15th June. The Safe Return Plan can be accessed at the following link: [www.gov.ie/en/publication/bcd91-a-safe-return-to-on-site-further-and-higher-education-and-research/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/bcd91-a-safe-return-to-on-site-further-and-higher-education-and-research/)

The plan, which emerged following extensive discussions between university representatives, public health and other relevant stakeholders, provided a framework for higher education institutions to proceed with planning for a return to on-site campus learning that would be in line with public health guidance.

In that context, institutions and providers have undertaken their own detailed planning and work for a comprehensive return to on-site activity. At a minimum, on-site activity this year will include laboratory teaching and learning, classroom based teaching and learning, tutorials, workshops, smaller lectures, research, return to work-spaces and access to libraries with appropriate protective measures in place. As part of the safe return to on-site learning, other on campus non-educational activities and facilities such as sports, bars, canteens, clubs and societies will operate in line with prevailing general public health advice for those activities.

The Higher Education Institutions have committed to maximising the on-campus experience available for all students, in line with public health advice. Due to the diversity among education providers, each institution will implement the return to campus in their own way. It is not for me to determine the exact way in which any institution implements the return to on-campus learning.

My Department and I have engaged with Trinity College and we understand the amount of face-to-face teaching will increase significantly over the coming weeks. I encourage students to engage with Trinity College directly on this matter, as the university itself is best placed to provide information on how the return to campus will progress throughout the academic year.

*Question No. 148 answered with Question No. 147.*

### **Cybersecurity Policy**

149. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his Department's IT infrastructure is monitored for security breaches on a 24/7 basis; the guidance provided from Government on same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45312/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** My Department implements multiple Cybersecurity protocols and measures including 24X7 IT Security Monitoring, User Awareness, Perimeter Security, Anti-virus/Anti-Malware, Email and Web filtering, System Patching, Risk Management, Policies, Regular Vulnerability Assessments/Penetration Testing, Mobile Device Management, Access Management, Incident Management, Event Monitoring, Information Security Governance, GDPR Awareness, Disaster Recovery, Offline backups, Supplier Management and Encryption

In relation to guidance from Government, the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC)

which is located within the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, is the primary cyber security authority in the State. The NCSC provides a range of cyber security services to operators of Critical National Infrastructure, Government Departments and Agencies. My Department's cyber security protocols are supported by the work of the NCSC and the national computer security incident response team, CSIRT, which provides early warnings, alerts, announcements and dissemination of information about risk and incidents to my Department.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

150. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the steps taken by his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within his Department who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; his plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45369/21]

**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 with the exception of roles where the nature of the work did not lend itself to remote working. Following the Taoiseach's announcement on the 1st of September, my department is now in the process of introducing a phased return to the workplace.

In relation to the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work in my department, 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 and Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas.

Staff of my department have the ability to participate in video and web conferencing meetings on multiple platforms and can join a meeting on a desktop, laptop, mobile phone or landline. Between my department and the Department of Education\*, we have approximately 700 Cisco Webex seats to enable staff members to host meetings on the Webex platform. The Webex seats were procured in accordance with the Office of Government Procurement's guidelines for procuring goods and services.

\*The Department of Education ICT unit provides ICT shared services for the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

151. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the steps taken by agencies under the remit of his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within these agencies who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; if there are plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45386/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The information sought in relation to the aegis bodies under the remit of my Department is not held by my Department. Contact details for the State Bodies under the aegis of my Department are set out in the attached document, should the Deputy wish to contact them directly with this query.

		Contact E-Mail Addresses for State Bodies under the Remit of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
Name of Body	Dedicated Email address for the Members of the Oireachtas	Designated Official Responsible for assisting Oireachtas Members
Higher Education Authority	Oireachtas@hea.ie	Padraic Mellett*
Irish Research Council	Oireachtas@research.ie	Padraic Mellett*
Grangegorman Development Agency (note 1)	Communications@ggda.ie	nora.rahill@ggda.ie
SOLAS (Note 2)	oireachtasinfo@solas.ie	Nikki Gallagher*
Skillnets Ltd	oireachtas@skillnets.com	t.donnery@skillnets.com
Quality and Qualifications Ireland	ceo@qqi.ie	ceo@qqi.ie
Léargas – The Exchange Bureau	oireachtas@leargas.ie	fbroughan@leargas.ie
Science Foundation Ireland	ciara.cotter@sfi.ie	Ciara Cotter

Note 1 – In regard to the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Irish Research Council (IRC) as the IRC operates under the auspices of the HEA. Mr Mellett will address Oireachtas queries for both the HEA and IRC. Please use Oireachtas@hea.ie and Oireachtas@research.ie respectively to contact Mr Mellett.

### Apprenticeship Programmes

152. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the current requirements with regard to apprenticeship programmes (details supplied). [45407/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** 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 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. This has increased the average programme duration for the current cohort of craft apprentices.

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:-

1) COVID-19 recovery measures

- 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.

- 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 under way. Step 1 of the plan includes an increase in the number of training workshops available across further and higher education from September 2021 onwards under a structural response. 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. An update issued to ETBs on 20th September on an agreed response to maximise and expand provision to clear the waiting lists for phase 2 training, with a number of information sessions for staff due to take place over the coming weeks. A communication will also issue to apprentices over the coming days.

- 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.

## 2) Structural increase in capacity

- €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.

Further updates will be published over the coming weeks on [www.apprenticeship.ie](http://www.apprenticeship.ie).

*Question No. 153 answered with Question No. 147.*

## Third Level Admissions

154. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his attention has been drawn to the number of students who have failed to get any CAO offers due to errors in the student exam number; if there is an adequate system for alerting schools as well as students to the presence of such errors; and if there is a way in which students can be facilitated to participate in courses for which their results demonstrate they should have been selected. [45507/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Universities and Institutes of Technology determine their own procedures for admission. The CAO process applications for undergraduate, and some postgraduate, courses on their behalf.

Decisions on admissions are made by the Higher Education Institutions who then instruct the CAO to make offers to successful candidates. Neither I nor my Department have a role in the operation of the CAO.

Where the CAO is notified of an error in an application after Round One offers have issued, they update the account information and ask the higher education institutions to consider them

for Round Two. The higher education institutions will then do their best to accommodate applicants with offers on Round Two. A portion of the offers that are issued in Round Two every year are to applicants who need to be accommodated after adjustments have been made due to applicant omissions or errors, or administrative errors caused by the higher education institutions or the CAO.

I appreciate that it can be quite upsetting for an applicant to realise their examination information was incorrect, and it is my understanding that every effort is made by the CAO and the higher education institutions to facilitate such applicants in Round Two.

If the issue is not resolved to the applicant's satisfaction, the option to appeal is available. The CAO has an Independent Appeals Commission, to which recourse may be had by applicants who believe that they have been treated unfairly by the CAO, and whose complaints have not been resolved by the CAO. The function of the Appeals Commission is to ensure that the rules are applied fairly.

### **Third Level Admissions**

155. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if a person (details supplied) in County Clare will be accommodated in either of two colleges in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45508/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The Deputy will be aware that Higher Education Institutions are autonomous bodies and admissions to third level courses is a matter for the institutions concerned and not for my Department to intervene.

### **Third Level Education**

156. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the person or body which determines whether graduation ceremonies will be held in person or online; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45565/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Following Government approval, I published A Safe Return: Plan for a safe return to on-site Further and Higher Education and Research in 2021/22 on June 15th. The Safe Return Plan can be accessed at the following link: [www.gov.ie/en/publication/bcd91-a-safe-return-to-on-site-further-and-higher-education-and-research/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/bcd91-a-safe-return-to-on-site-further-and-higher-education-and-research/)

The plan, which emerged following extensive discussions between university representatives, public health and other relevant stakeholders, provided a framework for higher education institutions to proceed with planning for a return to onsite campus learning that would be in line with public health guidance. In that context, institutions and providers are currently progressing with their own detailed planning and work for a comprehensive return to on-site activity. At a minimum, on-site activity next year will include laboratory teaching and learning, classroom based teaching and learning, tutorials, workshops, smaller lectures, research, return to work-spaces and access to libraries with appropriate protective measures in place. As part of the safe return to on-site learning, other on campus non-educational activities and facilities such as sports, bars, canteens, clubs and societies will operate in line with prevailing general public

health advice for those activities.

Higher education institutions are autonomous bodies, and the way in which the Plan will be implemented will vary from institution to institution. However, I do hope students can be accommodated by institutions for in person graduations in line with public health advice.

### **Apprenticeship Programmes**

157. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the steps he is taking to address the backlogs in apprenticeship schemes due to the delays as a result of Covid-19 restrictions. [45705/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** 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 apprentice off-the-job training was prioritised for a return to on-site learning across further and higher education institutions as COVID restrictions allowed.

- 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 in delivery. 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. An update issued to ETBs on 20th September, with a number of information sessions for staff due to take place over the coming weeks. A communication will also issue to apprentices over the coming days.

- Phase 4 and 6 intakes are currently scheduled three times 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.

Further updates will be published over the coming weeks on [www.apprenticeship.ie](http://www.apprenticeship.ie).

### **Apprenticeship Programmes**

158. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will increase the remuneration rates for apprentices who have had their apprenticeships extended due to Covid-19 delays beyond their initial training period. [45706/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** Apprenticeship is undertaken under a contract of employment and, for the majority of the 62 apprenticeships that are currently available, the rate of pay is agreed by the employer and apprentice at the start of the programme.

For the 25 craft apprenticeship programmes, applicable pay rates are agreed by the partners within the relevant sector, or are set out in Sectoral Employment Orders for the Construction Sector and Mechanical Engineering Building Services Contracting Sector. Rates vary between occupations and sectors but in all cases craft apprenticeship rates are expressed as a proportion of the qualified rate, increasing yearly from 33% of the qualified rate in year one to 90% in year four. Payment is also based on attainment of relevant skill, knowledge and competence achieved after successfully completing each phase of training. The most up to date rates for these sectors are attached.

[[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-22\\_pq158-22-09-21\\_en.doc](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-22_pq158-22-09-21_en.doc) Rates]

ETBs pay a training allowance to craft apprentices undertaking periods of off-the-job training. This training allowance is equivalent to the relevant agreed rate of pay and is paid in addition to either a travel or an accommodation allowance. For the period of off-the-job training, apprentices who have experienced a delay in their apprenticeship may be paid a training allowance at a rate which is one point higher than the rate normally assigned to that phase. This payment is in line with SOLAS internal procedures which govern apprenticeship operations and is currently being implemented across each Education and Training Board, Institutes of Technology, and Technological Universities.

SOLAS and the HEA are working with education and training providers to address the backlog in access to off-the-job training periods (phases 2,4 and 6 of the seven phase craft apprenticeship). All off-the-job training is reverting to full class attendance as of September, doubling the capacity which was available during COVID-19 measures. Additional interventions are being rolled out across the sector and details on these will be made available over the coming weeks.

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

159. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the steps he is taking to ensure students can return safely to in-person teaching in further and higher education contexts. [45707/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Following Government approval, I published A Safe Return: Plan for a safe return to on-site Further and Higher Education and Research in 2021/22 on June 15th. The Safe Return Plan can be accessed at the following link: [www.gov.ie/en/publication/bcd91-a-safe-return-to-on-site-further-and-higher-education-and-research/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/bcd91-a-safe-return-to-on-site-further-and-higher-education-and-research/)

The plan, which emerged following extensive and productive discussions between university representatives, public health and other relevant stakeholders, provided a framework for higher education institutions to proceed with planning for a return to onsite campus learning that would be in line with public health guidance. In that context, institutions and providers are currently progressing with their own detailed planning and work for a comprehensive return to on-site activity.

All returning students have resumed onsite activity and first year students will commence next week. In line with their arrival, the Department has worked with the HSE to establish a number of pop-up vaccination centres across 11 different institutions to maximise uptake of vaccinations. In addition, free face masks will be provided.

## **Coroners Service**

160. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Justice the average waiting time for an inquest at each coroner's office. [45286/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** As the Deputy will be aware, Coroners are independent in the conduct of their functions and neither I nor my Department have any role in the scheduling of inquests by a coroner.

Coroners are continuing to work to schedule inquests in a safe manner. Most coroners hold inquests in local court houses, and as a result of Covid-19, given public health considerations, inquests have unfortunately been severely curtailed.

The Courts Service works closely with coroners across the country to facilitate inquests and continue to do so while ensuring adherence to public health guidelines.

I also understand that some coroners are holding what are referred to as 'documentary inquests' or remote inquests, which require very small numbers of attendees, and take place with the agreement of families. Larger inquests, requiring multiple witnesses, are being rescheduled to a later date.

In order to support the work of the Coroner, the Civil Law and Criminal Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2020 provided, among other items, for the appointment of temporary coroners to act simultaneously with a coroner in exceptional circumstances, such as were presented by the Covid 19 pandemic.

Dublin is the busiest coronial district and specifically in regard to the situation in the Dublin coronial district, a second coroner and two new deputy coroners were appointed in February 2020.

Additional information is available on the website [www.coroners.ie](http://www.coroners.ie) or on the Dublin Coroners website [www.dublincoronerscourt.ie](http://www.dublincoronerscourt.ie) which may be of assistance.

### Cybersecurity Policy

161. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Justice if her Department's IT infrastructure is monitored for security breaches on a 24/7 basis; the guidance provided from Government on same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45315/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department's IMT Division employs a range of policies, tools and practices to safeguard the integrity, confidentiality and availability of my Department's data and IMT infrastructure and to protect it from all potential threats, both external and internal.

To facilitate this, the IMT Division engages expert support from specialist resources through its managed service contract. The current managed service contract provides for 24 hour support to one of our two data centres, and extended cover for the other.

My Department's IMT Division liaises with the Computer Security Incident Response Team (the CSIRT-IE) of the National Cyber Security Centre. The CSIRT-IE issues general cyber security updates on a regular basis and issues continuous alerts to IMT Division in relation to specific potential cyber security breaches, including advice on appropriate actions to mitigate such threats, which are then implemented.

My Department also retains independent external cybersecurity expertise and utilises this service as necessary.

### Flexible Work Practices

162. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Justice the steps taken by her Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within her Department who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; her plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45372/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I wish to advise the Deputy that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment is driving the implementation of the National Remote Work Strategy and coordinates this through its Remote Work Interdepartmental Group, which includes representatives from multiple Government Departments and agencies.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment is leading on the legislative right to request remote work, and is providing guidance to employers and employees to promote the adoption of remote and hybrid working arrangements. Its *#MakingRemoteWork* communications campaign aims to raise awareness of the advice and information available from Government to help workers and employers facilitate more remote and blended working.

The Deputy will be aware that a central policy framework for blended working in the civil service, which is being led by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, will be finalised in the coming weeks. This framework will inform the development of organisation-level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department and the offices, agencies and bodies under their remit, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across

key policy areas in the civil service. There is recognition also of a need to create opportunities for people to balance their working and personal lives more effectively where possible.

All staff in my Department who can work remotely have access to video conferencing facilities. The video conferencing facilities in use were procured following Office of Government Procurement (OGP) guidelines. My Department has commenced work on developing its own blended working policy and arrangements, which takes into account its specific business and operational needs and requirements, while remaining grounded in the Civil Service Framework. Blended working arrangements are expected to be implemented by March 2022.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

163. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Justice the steps taken by agencies under the remit of her Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within these agencies who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; if there are plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45389/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment is leading on the legislative right to request remote work, and is providing guidance to employers and employees to promote the adoption of remote and hybrid working arrangements. Its *#MakingRemoteWork* communications campaign aims to raise awareness of the advice and information available from Government to help workers and employers facilitate more remote and blended working.

A central policy framework for blended working in the civil service, which is being led by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, will be finalised in the coming weeks. This framework will inform the development of organisation- level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department and the offices, agencies and bodies under their remit, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas in the civil service. There is recognition also of a need to create opportunities for people to balance their working and personal lives more effectively where possible.

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 all frontline staff in agencies such as An Garda Síochána, the Irish Prison Service, Forensic Science Ireland and others.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, members of **An Garda Síochána** were required to work from their usual locations with appropriate public health measures in place, to provide essential services. Garda staff who can carry out their duties remotely have been facilitated to work from home where possible and as roles and business needs allow. Garda information systems can be accessed remotely by staff members who have Garda-issued devices or secure tokens. Remote video conferencing and remote access is available on multiple devices including PCs, laptops and tablets. The framework for the management of public procurement is as per the requirements of EU and National procurement rules.

70% of **Courts Service** personnel are operational staff who are required to be on-site on a permanent or semi-permanent basis, to facilitate the running of the courts and deliver services

to the public. Currently there is no formal programme in place regarding remote working, however staff requests to work remotely are facilitated where possible, depending on business needs. Access to cloud services for remote video conferencing is currently available to approximately 55% of staff. Supporting the principle of remote working, a programme to build and deliver a modern digital desktop to all staff is currently underway, to be delivered by Q2, 2022.

Since March 2020, all **Irish Prison Service** headquarters staff have had the option to work from home, in line with Government guidelines. A Blended Working Policy is to be introduced for Irish Prison Service headquarters staff in the coming months. The Irish Prison Service ICT directorate has provided the necessary software and hardware to enable access to services for remote video conferencing and the capacity to work remotely. The provision of this software and hardware was provided for under the existing OGP frameworks.

Due to the operational nature of the work carried out by the **Criminal Assets Bureau** and its standalone, secure information system, which can only be accessed on the premises, staff and officers are required to be available to attend at offices regularly. A limited number of staff whose duties are not confined to the standalone, secure system have the capacity to work from home and at present, 40-50% of staff currently avail of blended working. All staff have access to video conferencing as required. The Bureau adheres to Office of Government Procurement guidelines in regard to procurement.

The **Irish Film Classification Office (IFCO)** is following Department protocols to support the implementation of the National Remote Work Strategy. Approximately 90% of the Irish Film Classification Office have access to cloud services for remote video conferencing and the capacity to work remotely. Procurement is managed through my Department.

The National Remote Work Strategy is, and will continue to be supported by the **Data Protection Commission** and employees will be facilitated to work remotely in line with relevant legislation. All staff currently have access to cloud services for remote video conferencing and the capacity to work remotely. As the value of the required licences to facilitate this was below the €25K threshold, three quotes were received from registered suppliers and a contract was awarded to the most economically advantageous tender.

**All Forensic Science Ireland staff** who require external access to the IT network have been provided with it and PCs and other peripherals have been sourced through the relevant OGP Framework.

All staff in the **Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission (GSOC)** are equipped to work remotely and have been working in this manner throughout the pandemic. Staff are enabled to avail of virtual meeting facilities where required. GSOC is committed to developing a blended working arrangement in line with the Government's policy to support remote working into the future.

Facilities to work remotely are in place for all **Insolvency Service of Ireland (ISI)** staff members. The ISI pay for two professional video conferencing accounts. The cost of these accounts is below the threshold that requires a competitive tender process.

The **Judicial Council** is currently considering how best to implement the National Remote Work Strategy 'Making Remote Work'. 100% of staff have access to cloud services for remote video conferencing and the capacity to work remotely.

The **Legal Aid Board** has sufficient equipment so that all Board staff can work remotely should the need arise again. Approximately 65% of Legal Aid Board staff currently have remote videoconferencing capability on their main remote working device. It is planned to increase

this to as close as possible to 100% through the technical reconfiguration of existing equipment rather than additional investment.

All **Private Security Authority (PSA)** staff were facilitated to work remotely throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and the PSA will introduce a formal Blended Working Policy in 2022.

**Property Services Regulatory Authority** staff continue to work remotely, attending the office only where there is a specific need. 100% of permanent staff have access to cloud services. Procurement of these facilities is managed through my Department.

### **School Facilities**

164. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health the status of the public health supports available to schools; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45751/21]

**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 Contracts**

165. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 1072 of 28 April 2021, the costs paid to those same companies from March to September 2021. [45279/21]

**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.

### **Ambulance Service**

166. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Health the number of ambulances in Cork city and county in each of the years 2016 to 2021, by ambulance depot in tabular form. [45283/21]

167. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Health the total number of ambulances by county in tabular form. [45284/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 166 and 167 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. 167 answered with Question No. 166.*

### **Departmental Functions**

168. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Health the legislative powers underpinning the office of disabilities appeals in his Department; the way decisions can be appealed from this office through the judicial system or by another mechanism; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45289/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** The Disability Act 2005 provides for the establishment of a Disability Appeals Officer as an independent officer appointed by the Minister for Health. He or she provides an appeals service for persons who wish to appeal against a finding or recommendation of a Complaints Officer of the Health Service Executive made under Section 18(1) of the Disability Act 2005, or against the failure of the HSE or an Educational Service Provider (ESP) to implement a recommendation of a complaints office.

Information regarding the legislation underpinning office of the Disability Appeals Officer, as well information regarding procedures and processes related to the functions of the office, can be found at the following link:

[www.gov.ie/en/publication/08b143-office-of-the-disability-appeals-officer/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/08b143-office-of-the-disability-appeals-officer/)

### **Hospital Waiting Lists**

169. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on the waiting list to see a consultant haematologist at St. James's Hospital, Dublin; the average waiting times to see a consultant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45290/21]

**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 information requested by the Deputy regarding the number of persons on the waiting list to see a consultant haematologist at St. James's Hospital, Dublin; the average waiting times to see a consultant; is outlined in the attached document.

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.

			St. James's Hospital, Haematology Outpatients, numbers waiting as at 26/08/2021
Time bands (months)	0-6 Mths	6+ Mths	Grand Total
St. James's Hospital Haematology OP	332	38	370
Grand Total	332	38	370
St. James's Hospital Haematology OP		Mean Average Wait in Days	
Mean Average wait		84	
St. James's Hospital Haematology OP		Median Wait in Days	
Median Average wait		62	

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.

### Hospital Staff

170. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of full-time consultant neonatologist and consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist working in the maternity unit at St. Luke's General Hospital, Kilkenny in each of the years of 2018 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45291/21]

**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.

### Healthcare Infrastructure Provision

171. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the capital investments that have been sought by the Ireland East Hospital Group for Our Lady's Hospital, Navan; the status of each application; the status of the planned capital development at Our Lady's Hospital, Navan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45292/21]

**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

172. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of full-time head and neck oncology nurse specialists at the Mater Hospital in each of the years of 2018 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45293/21]

**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**

173. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of full-time nurses working in Monaghan Hospital in 2020 and to date in 2021; the number of vacant nursing posts in the hospital; the steps being taken to fill the vacant nursing posts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45294/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

### **Emergency Departments**

174. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health when works are due to commence on the new accident and emergency department at Beaumont Hospital, Dublin 9; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45295/21]

**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**

175. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of full-time staff by job title working in the orthopaedic department of Tullamore Regional Hospital; the number of staff vacancies by job title within this department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45296/21]

**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**

176. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated full year cost of recruiting four additional full-time dental hygienists for both CHO 6 and 7; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45297/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Staff**

177. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of staff positions unfilled at Tallaght University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45298/21]

**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

178. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the staffing levels in each department at University Hospital Kerry including the emergency department in February 2020; if he will provide figures for staffing levels as of September 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45299/21]

**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

179. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of community-based neurorehabilitation teams in CHO9; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45300/21]

**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 Procedures

180. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of paediatric video fluoroscopy procedures that took place at CHI Temple Street and CHI Crumlin in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45301/21]

**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

181. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of full-time nutrition specialists working in Letterkenny University Hospital in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45302/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Saolta Hospital Group advise that the number of Dieticians working in Letterkenny University Hospital in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021 is as follows:

Date	Number of Staff	Whole Time Equivalents
1st January 2019	7	5.5
1st January 2020	7	5.8
September 2021	8	6.8

### Cybersecurity Policy

182. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Health if his Department's IT infra-

structure is monitored for security breaches on a 24/7 basis; the guidance provided from Government on same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45313/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** My Department's IT infrastructure is fully monitored on a 24/7 basis, providing for a rapid response to any notified incidents. Specialised software is in place to mitigate against malicious software, and to provide early warning notifications of same.

My Department continues to liaise with the National Cyber Security Centre, the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer, our security partner and with colleagues across the Public Service to ensure to ensure conformity with standards, and that best practice is followed in relation to all aspects of cybersecurity.

### **Health Services**

183. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health when the Sláintecare project on the development of a national diabetes register will recommence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45323/21]

184. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health his views on the need for a national diabetes register; the reason there is no current register; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45324/21]

193. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health his plans for the development of a national diabetes register; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45339/21]

215. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn for the need for a national diabetes register; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45476/21]

238. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Health when the Sláintecare project on the development of a national diabetes register will recommence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45547/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 183, 184, 193, 215 and 238 together.

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.

*Question No. 184 answered with Question No. 183.*

## Vaccination Programme

185. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Health if he will examine a situation in which a person (details supplied) is experiencing a huge delay in receiving their vaccine certificate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45329/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The HSE have advised my officials that this issue has been resolved and that the Digital Covid Certificate (DCC) for Mrs. Reilly will be printed and posted early next week.

## Data Protection

186. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 1603 of 21 April 2021, if there has been an outcome to the inquiry by the Data Protection Commission which is referred to in the parliamentary question; if the findings have been issued; the actions that have been taken on this matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45330/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Data Protection Commission (DPC) is conducting a statutory inquiry under Section 110 of the Data Protection Act 2018 into processing of personal data by my Department in a number of court cases. This inquiry commenced in March 2021 and is ongoing. My Department is cooperating with and supporting the work of the DPC.

## Departmental Functions

187. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Health the position in respect of the independence of the Office of the Disability Appeals Officer; if this is part of his Department; if there are senior persons in his Department over the office who can have an influence in relation to the way the office operates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45331/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** The Disability Act 2005 provides for the establishment of a Disability Appeals Officer as an independent officer appointed by the Minister for Health. He or she provides an appeals service for persons who wish to appeal against a finding or recommendation of a Complaints Officer of the Health Service Executive made under Section 18(1) of the Disability Act 2005, or against the failure of the HSE or an Educational Service Provider (ESP) to implement a recommendation of a complaints office.

Information regarding the legislation underpinning office of the Disability Appeals Officer, as well information regarding procedures and processes related to the functions of the office, can be found at the following link:

[www.gov.ie/en/publication/08b143-office-of-the-disability-appeals-officer/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/08b143-office-of-the-disability-appeals-officer/)

## Hospital Facilities

188. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of removing hospital car parking charges; the status of the HSE review requested in March 2018 on this matter with a view to establishing clear national guidelines; the status of the draft

implementation plan resulting from this review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45334/21]

**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. My Department and the HSE are currently examining the issue.

In relation to the specific service matter raised, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## Health Services

189. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health the status of the HSE pilot scheme for a free home STI and HIV testing service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45335/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented interruption to normal healthcare activity in 2020/2021, affecting the provision of all healthcare services, including public STI clinics.

Over the last 18 months, public STI services have re-configured services, establishing on-line booking systems and providing virtual appointments, in order to support service provision in line with social distancing and infection prevention control requirements resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Public STI clinics have prioritised those with symptoms and who require treatment, in order to treat active infections and minimise onward transmission. The GMHS website and other resources such as [www.man2man.ie](http://www.man2man.ie) and [www.sexualwellbeing.ie](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie) are regularly updated to reflect current service delivery and to signpost users to the HSE list of approved STI and PrEP services.

The HSE is continuing to progress a number of initiatives that aim to reduce the level of HIV and STIs nationally and improve access to services for those in need as follows:

- The promotion of safer sex messages to the public via a range of social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.
- During the pandemic, the public has been advised about STI clinic restrictions and encouraged to consider safer sexual practices to reduce the risk of HIV and STI transmission.
- Guidance has been issued around sex and COVID-19 which advised the public to limit numbers of partners to reduce transmission of HIV/STIs as well as COVID-19 during the pandemic.
- Those who are symptomatic are advised to contact a clinic directly for an emergency appointment.
- Condoms are freely available to NGO partners and service providers via the National Condom Distribution (NCDS) service.
- A number of NGOs have established postal services to make condoms and lubricant accessible to service-users throughout the pandemic while venues were closed.
- Free rapid HIV testing is available in Dublin, Cork, Galway and Limerick through com-

munity NGO partners HIV Ireland, Sexual Health Centre Cork, Sexual Health West and GOS-HH. NGO partners have adapted their services and are currently providing free rapid HIV testing from their offices or alternative venues.

- STI/HIV testing is currently available through a HSE home STI testing pilot project in Dublin, Wicklow, Kildare, Cork and Kerry (funded by the Sláintecare Integration Fund). This pilot commenced in early 2021, in Dublin, Cork and Kerry initially, overseen by the HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme through SH24.

As a result of high demand, and in response to the pressures imposed by a public health declared early infectious syphilis outbreak, the HSE SHCPP in consultation with my Department, have extended the pilot to additional areas (Kildare, Meath and Wicklow) and for an additional time period. The possibility of further expansion is being scoped currently, given the need for the service and its success in reaching cohorts that are typically underrepresented amongst those presenting in person at STI clinics.

As this is a service matter, I have also asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Traveller Community**

190. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health the status of the delivery of the National Traveller Health Action Plan; the status of the HSE steering group on this plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45336/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) is the Government policy framework for addressing the health and other needs of Travellers. It contains over 30 health-related actions across four themes. The Dept of Health and the HSE are represented on the steering committee for NTRIS and report on a regular basis on the various health actions.

A key health action in NTRIS (#73) is to develop and implement a detailed action plan to address the specific health needs of Travellers, using a social determinants approach. The lead role in developing the action plan rests with the HSE, in conjunction with Traveller organisations. The Programme for Government also includes a commitment to implement a National Traveller Health Action plan.

I understand that last year the HSE established a steering committee, which included representatives of Traveller organisations, to finalise the plan. The committee recently submitted a draft plan to the HSE national director for Community Strategy and Planning. I am advised that consideration of the plan and its resource implications has been delayed by the prioritisation of the rollout of the Covid-19 vaccination programme.

I look forward to receiving the agreed action plan and I am fully committed to providing the leadership and resources to ensure the implementation of the plan by the HSE.

The details requested by the Deputy are operational in nature and accordingly I have referred the question to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy.

### **Traveller Community**

191. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health the breakdown in

spending on the €2.1 million allocation in Budget 2021 to enhance access to health services for socially excluded groups with an emphasis on the €270,000 allocated to expand Traveller health units; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45337/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** In Budget 2021, €2.1m was allocated to enhance access to health services for socially excluded groups. This funding will be used to improve access to healthcare services for the Roma community and other vulnerable migrants, to expand Traveller health units, to enhance healthcare services for asylum seekers and refugees living in direct provision and for initiatives for victims of domestic violence and the LGBTI+ community.

The HSE has responsibility for the delivery of these measures and its priority actions are set out in the national service plan 2021.

The level of funding released for delivery of these measures is subject to the submission, review, approval and commencement date for the measures. The drawdown of this funding has been recently approved by the Department of Health.

As the detail requested by the Deputy relate to operational and service matters, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Services**

192. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health the detail of the roadmap to pre-pandemic access in all maternity units and maternity hospitals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45338/21]

**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. 193 answered with Question No. 183.*

### **Community Care**

194. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health when the specialist community diabetes teams under the enhanced community care programme will be appointed; if it will be available to all persons with diabetes free of charge; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45340/21]

**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**

195. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to provide funding to appoint a clinical psychologist to each acute hospital diabetes multidisciplinary team; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45341/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Model of Integrated Care for Patients with Type 2 Diabetes sets out that diabetes is to be managed within the acute system by the diabetes multidisciplinary team including access to psychology support where available.

However, I acknowledge there is a deficit in the number of hospital staff providing psychological services dedicated to diabetes care.

The 2021 National Service Plan recognised the need for an unprecedented expansion of the permanent health workforce through permanent appointments. Funding has been provided for an increase to approximately 135,655 WTE across the health service by December 2021, which is an increase of 15,838 WTE over funded 2020 levels. There is significant workforce recruitment underway. The HSE Pay and Numbers Strategy identifies the specific roles and grades to be hired.

### **Health Services**

196. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to provide a diabetes psychology resource to each community diabetes specialist team hub under the Integrated Model of Care for the Prevention and Management of Chronic Disease Implementation Guide; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45342/21]

**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**

197. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to provide funding to appoint a 0.5 whole-time equivalent clinical psychologist to each acute hospital diabetes paediatric diabetes team; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45343/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Funding for additional staffing or other service developments must be considered in the first instance as part of the annual estimates processes, in the context of competing priorities for funding. This process is currently ongoing for 2021.

In relation to current paediatric diabetes service provision, I have asked the Health Service Executive to provide an update directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

### **Departmental Schemes**

198. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to extend eligibility to the long-term illness scheme for reimbursement of blood glucose test strips to all women who develop gestational diabetes during pregnancy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45344/21]

**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**

199. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health the number of women who developed gestational diabetes during pregnancy in each of the years 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45345/21]

**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**

200. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health the cost of the type 2 diabetes cycle of care programme since its inception; the number of persons currently availing of the programme; the number of general practitioners that provide the programme; if an audit of the programme has been completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45346/21]

**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 a new Chronic Disease Management 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 and is being rolled out to all adult GMS patients over four years (2020 to 2023). This year the programme has been rolled out to those aged 65 years and over. The Chronic Disease Management programme will replace the Diabetes Cycle of Care programme as it is rolled out.

As the issues raised are service matters, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

201. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to extend the type 2 diabetes cycle of care programme to all persons with type 2 diabetes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45347/21]

**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 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 and is being rolled out to all adult GMS patients over four years (2020 to 2023). This year the programme has been rolled out to those aged 65 years and over. The chronic disease management programme 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.

There is currently no plan to extend type 2 diabetes care under the chronic disease management programme to patients who do not hold a medical or GP visit card.

While Type 2 diabetic patients who do not hold a medical card or GP visit card are not eli-

gible under the Diabetes cycle of care or chronic disease management programmes, 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.

### **Medical Aids and Appliances**

202. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to fund the provision of the FreeStyle Libre flash glucose monitoring system to persons with diabetes over 21 years of age based on clinical need; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45348/21]

**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**

203. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health the number of applications for FreeStyle Libre submitted by individual hospitals for persons with diabetes over 21 years of age; and the number that were approved and refused respectively, in each of the years 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [45349/21]

**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**

204. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to ensure a minimum of one whole-time equivalent diabetes specialist pump nurse in all 18-dose adjusting for normal eating certified diabetes centres; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45350/21]

205. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to provide access to the dose adjusting for normal eating programme for all persons with type 1 diabetes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45351/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 204 and 205 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. 205 answered with Question No. 204.*

### **Flexible Work Practices**

206. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health the steps taken by his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within his Department who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; his plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will

make a statement on the matter. [45370/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** 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. 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 blended working from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

My Department implemented the necessary remote working infrastructure as an early response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which was facilitated through existing contracts. This includes secure remote access to videoconferencing, email and file systems. 100% of departmental staff continue to have access to these facilities as we move towards a blended working solution.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

207. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health the steps taken by agencies under the remit of his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within these agencies who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; if there are plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45387/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The agencies under the aegis of my Department are currently working in line with Government COVID-19 guidance, meaning that the majority of staff who could work from home, have worked from home during the pandemic period. Guidance now provides for a phased and staggered approach in respect of the return to the workplace being possible from 20th September onwards.

A central framework for Blended Working in the Civil Service for the post-Covid era 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 agency, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across the sectors.

Once agreed and introduced, staff of the agencies under the aegis of my Department can apply to their own HR manager, via the application form in the Framework, for a blended working pattern. It is not possible at present to predict what the capacity in respect of applications for blended working post Covid will be.

In line with the Government campaign - #MakingRemoteWork – I am supportive of the national remote working strategy, and of the agencies under the aegis of my Department facilitating all reasonable and practical applications for blended working in the post-Covid era, while ensuring the continued effective and efficient delivery of business.

In respect of the elements of the Deputy's question regarding remote video conferencing and the framework associated with same, I have sought a response from each of the Non-Commercial State Agencies, and once that information has been received, I will revert to the Deputy under separate cover. I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy in respect of the staff of the HSE and the S.38 agencies under their aegis.

208. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health if provision can be made for manual hard copy passenger locator forms to facilitate the electronically challenged and those without smart phones; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45408/21]

**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 system 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.

For passengers who do not have access to smart phones, the PLF receipt that issues to passengers can be printed in order to show officials upon arrival in the State.

### **Disability Services**

209. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health when a child (details supplied) will receive an appointment for occupational therapy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45442/21]

**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**

210. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health when a child (details supplied) will receive an appointment for speech therapy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45443/21]

**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**

211. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health when a child (details supplied) will receive an appointment for physiotherapy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45444/21]

**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**

212. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the status of the ongoing problems with the availability of dental treatment to patients with a medical card; if his attention has been drawn to the number of dental practices no longer providing treatment under the medical card scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45459/21]

265. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Health the steps he is taking to resolve the difficulties for persons with medical cards accessing dental treatment since the pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45734/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 212 and 265 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. Patients may choose to have their treatment undertaken by any dentist who participates in the Scheme.

I am aware that there has been a reduction in the numbers of dentists participating in the DTSS since the beginning of the current COVID-19 pandemic. Some people are experiencing problems in accessing a service close to their home. However, I have been assured by the HSE that their local services on the ground will assist any persons who are experiencing problems in accessing a service.

The national approach to future oral health service provision will be informed by Smile agus Sláinte, the National Oral Health Policy, which was published in 2019. The aim of the policy is to develop a model of care that will enable preventative approaches to be prioritised, improve access, and support interventions appropriate to current and future oral health needs.

I am committed to ensuring the sustainability 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.

*Question No. 213 withdrawn.*

### **Dental Services**

214. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will be assessed for orthodontic treatment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45473/21]

**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. 215 answered with Question No. 183.*

### **Health Services**

216. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Health his plans to provide sup-

ports for amputees and their families; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45478/21]

**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**

217. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Health when the four currently unfilled epilepsy nurse specialist posts approved in 2018 will be appointed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45512/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this question relates to an operational matter for the Health Service Executive (HSE), I have asked that the HSE responds to the Deputy directly.

### **Medicinal Products**

218. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Health the timeline for the inquiry into the historical licensing and prescribing of sodium valproate and the establishment of a stakeholder group to review safety and risk measures in relation to the prescribing and distribution of sodium valproate, which was announced in November 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45513/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Details of the proposed inquiry into the historical licensing and use of sodium valproate in Ireland, and of the stakeholder group referred to by the Deputy, are currently being considered by officials within the Department of Health.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

219. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health the reason a person (details supplied) is waiting so long for a hospital appointment in Navan Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45516/21]

**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 Waiting Lists**

220. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients on outpatient waiting lists in tabular form at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda; if he will provide a breakdown or medical speciality of those numbers by department in tabular form; and the length of time that patients have been on the list. [45517/21]

221. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients on outpatient waiting lists in tabular form in Louth County Hospital; if he will provide a breakdown or medical speciality of those numbers by department in tabular form; and the length of time that patients have been on the list. [45518/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 220 and 221 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 waiting list information requested by the deputy is outlined in the attached documents.

#### Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital Outpatient Waiting List by Hospital

	0-3 Months	3-6 Months	6-9 Months	9-12 Months	12-15 Months	15-18 Months	18-21 Months	21-24 Months	24-36 Months	36-48 Months	Grand Total
Cardiology	434	257	210	158	130	97	158	76	14		1534
Dermatology	1360	885	648	712	467	157	215	212		446	5102
Endocrinology	186	132	88	63	10						479
Gastro-Enterology	168	124		27							319
General Medicine	34				17						51
General Surgery	362	181	80	62	23	15	11				734
Gynaecology	526	380	305	282	166		45				1704
Haematology	129	41	12					20			202
Infectious Diseases		6									6
Nephrology	37			6							43
Ophthalmology	122	113	53	34	39	8					369
Orthopaedics	66	44	40	33	20	6	17				226
Otolaryngology (ENT)	402	359	221	171	116	23	101	80	98		1571

Paediatric ENT	69	55	52	52	21	27	46	44		84	450
Paediatrics	423	259	255	269	17	21		16			1260
Respiratory Medicine	89	73	29	32	20	19	47		26		335
Urology	294	228	195	186	120	68		32			1123
Small Vol Specialties											14
Grand Total	4720	3150	2217	2072	1153	483	642	439		646	15522

### Louth County Hospital Outpatient Waiting List by Specialty

Row Labels	0-3 Months	3-6 Months	6-9 Months	9-12 Months	12-15 Months	15-18 Months	18-21 Months	21-24 Months	24-36 Months	Grand Total
Endocrinology	107	77			10					194
General Surgery	386		93							479
Gynaecology	110	95	81	67		31				384
Ophthalmology	55	61	42	31	13	7			5	214
Orthopaedics	289	209	198	228	161	122	161		70	1438
Urology	47		30							77
Small Vol Specialties										13
Grand Total	1000	566	330	327	209	131	165		71	2799

*Question No. 221 answered with Question No. 220.*

### Dental Services

222. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Health the number of children on the waiting lists in counties Louth and Meath for dental appointments by local area in tabular form. [45519/21]

**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

223. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Health the number of children on the waiting lists in counties Louth and Meath for orthodontic appointments by local areas in tabular form. [45520/21]

**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.

### Nursing Homes

224. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health when he will commence the Nursing Homes Support Scheme (Amendment) Act 2021; the projected full year costs of the changes to the cap on farms and businesses; the projected full year cost on the changes to the treatment of capital following the sale of the family home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45521/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** The Nursing

Homes Support Scheme (Amendment) Act 2021 was signed into law on 22 July. The principal amendment introduced under the Act extended the three-year cap on contributions to farms and businesses owned by scheme participants, on the condition that these continue to be managed by a family successor for a certain period. The goal of this amendment is to assist in protecting the viability and sustainability of family farms and family run businesses. The timeline set out in the legislation ensures that the Act will be operational by the 20 October 2021.

The 2021 full year cost of this measure is estimated at €10.30m, reducing to €10.20m per annum in 2022 and 2023, with an additional per annum cost of €3.75m (€13.95m) being realised in 2024.

Under the NHSS Act 2009, a participant in the Fair Deal scheme contributes to costs at 7.5% against the value of their principal residence for their first three years in care; after this, the contributions from the residence is capped. However, if they then sold the residence, the resulting cash asset would be assessable indefinitely. The NHSS Amendment Act 2021 changed this, so that the three-year cap is also applied to the cash proceeds of sale of a principal residence, as long as the residence is sold after an individual enters long-term care. This amendment ensures that the value of the PPR continues to be protected for families, whether the home is sold before or after the resident leaves care. It also removes a disincentive against the sale of vacant properties, in the context of the government's Housing for All strategy.

The costs of this amendment were estimated at a total of €6.5m annually.

### **Hospital Waiting Lists**

225. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on the waiting list for gynaecology appointments; the waiting times for urgent and routine referrals in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45530/21]

230. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health the waiting times for gynaecological appointments in Letterkenny University Hospital for routine and urgent referrals in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [45535/21]

231. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health the waiting times for inpatient and outpatient gynaecological appointments at each hospital across the seven hospital groups in tabular form; if this information will be provided specifically regarding those waiting for three, six, nine, 12 or more than 12 months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45536/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 225, 230 and 231 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.

My Department continues to work with the HSE’s National Women & Infants Health Programme to improve access and ensure a more sustainable gynaecology service. The Programme has developed an Ambulatory Gynaecology Model of Care which centres on the establishment of one-stop “see and treat” ambulatory gynaecology clinics. The roll out of the Model of Care commenced in 2020, and funding has been provided under Budget 2021 to establish and/or expand services across additional clinics in 2021, including a clinic at Letterkenny University Hospital (LUH).

The HSE has advised that the new ambulatory gynaecology clinic at LUH is operational. Building on progress made since 2020 and, subject to resource availability, it is envisaged that up to a total of 20 ambulatory gynaecology clinics will be rolled out across the country, on a phased basis, in the coming years.

The information requested by the Deputy concerning gynaecology waiting lists is outlined in the attached documents.

#### Gynaecology Outpatient Waiting List By Hospital

	hospital name	0-3 Months	3-6 Months	6-9 Months	9-12 Months	12+ Months	Grand Total
Dublin Midlands Hospital Group							
	Coombe Women and Infants University Hospital	1116	523	221	185	658	2703
	Midland Regional Hospital Portlaoise	314	206	188	149	888	1745
	St. James’s Hospital			83			83
	Tallaght University Hospital	410	431	267	264	1817	3189
Ireland East Hospital Group							
	Mater Misericordiae University Hospital	235	41	12		10	298
	Midland Regional Hospital Mullingar	439	244	214	202	458	1557
	Our Lady’s Hospital Navan	78	61	27	59	166	391
	St. Columcille’s Hospital	17	11			9	37
	St. Luke’s General Hospital Kilkenny	266	88	15	5		374
	St. Vincent’s University Hospital	148	44	40	44	34	310

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	hospital name	0-3 Months	3-6 Months	6-9 Months	9-12 Months	12+ Months	Grand Total
	Wexford General Hospital	444	318	189	198	40	1189
	St. Michael's Hospital	120	83	45	24	248	520
RCSI Hospitals Group							
	Beaumont Hospital	152	139	114		38	443
	Cavan General Hospital	318	251	144	124	150	987
	Louth County Hospital	110	95	81	67	31	384
	Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital Drogheda	526	380	305	282	211	1704
	Rotunda Hospital	1320	989	611	357	17	3294
	Connolly Hospital Blanchardstown	179	139	104	84	28	534
Saolta University Health Care Group							
	Galway University Hospitals	878	416	225	261	589	2369
	Letterkenny University Hospital	405	145	47	35	145	777
	Portiuncula University Hospital	302	267	127	93	32	821
	Sligo University Hospital	242	195	129	146	380	1092
	Mayo University Hospital	232	176	144	127	52	731
South/South West Hospital Group							
	University Hospital Waterford	302	211	111	126	165	915
	Tipperary University Hospital	214	151	70	26	10	471
	University Hospital Kerry	278	225	123	134	366	1126
	Cork University Maternity Hospital	890	623	279	131	72	1995
University of Limerick Hospital Group							
	Ennis Hospital	108	76	55	68	294	601
	Nenagh Hospital	43	25	34	32	145	279
	St. John's Hospital Limerick	158	96	71	76	36	437
	University Hospital Limerick	554	190	186	111	388	1429
Children's Health Ireland							
	CHI at Temple St	98	45	49	44	29	265
Grand Total		10977	6885	4229	3499	7460	33050

All Hospitals Gynaecology OP

	0-6 Mths	6-12 Mths	12-18 Mths	18+ Mths	Small Vol Time-Band	Grand Total
19/12/2019	15,740	6,054	2,905	2,537	3	27,239
Invalid	1,350	15				1,365

22 September 2021

	0-6 Mths	6-12 Mths	12-18 Mths	18+ Mths	Small Vol Time-Band	Grand Total
Routine	10,668	5,061	2,409	2,237		20,375
	Small Vol Priority				3	3
Urgent	3,722	978	496	300		5,496
23/12/2020	15,187	5,955	3,570	4,065	1	28,778
Invalid	1,352	105	10			1,467
Routine	10,091	4,752	2,872	3,625		21,340
	SmallVolPriority				1	1
Urgent	3,744	1,098	688	440		5,970
26/08/2021	17,862	7,728	2,693	4,767		33,050
Invalid	2,409	457	128	105		3,099
Routine	11,335	6,258	2,230	4,163		23,986
Urgent	4,118	1,013	335	499		5,965

### Letterkenny Gynaecology OP

	0-6 Mths	6-12 Mths	12-18 Mths	18+ Mths	Grand Total
19/12/2019	589	343	321	524	1,777
Routine	279	138	128	358	903
Urgent	310	205	193	166	874
23/12/2020	488	208	186	458	1,340
Routine	144	80	110	387	721
Urgent	344	128	76	71	619
26/08/2021	550	82	55	90	777
Routine	188	53	39	85	365
Urgent	362	29	16	5	412

Note: These are Point-In-Time values.

They represent the Point-In-Time position for the three reference dates given.

They give no representation for any other time.

### Gynaecology IPDC Waiting List by Hospital

	0-3 Mths	3-6 Mths	6-9 Mths	9-12 Mths	12+ Mths	Grand Total
Beaumont Hospital	48	38	22	21	10	139
Cavan General Hospital		52				52
Cork University Maternity Hospital	140	109	72	54	219	594
Ennis Hospital		13				13

*Questions - Written Answers*

	0-3 Mths	3-6 Mths	6-9 Mths	9-12 Mths	12+ Mths	Grand Total
Galway University Hospitals	163	94	32	36	81	406
Letterkenny University Hospital	109	32	12	24	88	265
Louth County Hospital	78				46	124
Mater Misericordiae University Hospital	66	44	8	14	54	186
Mayo University Hospital	51	82	29	33	180	375
Midland Regional Hospital Mullingar	89	68	44	61	123	385
Midland Regional Hospital Portlaoise	33	28	23	32	43	159
Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital Drogheda	83	55	31	17	15	201
Our Lady's Hospital Navan	33				5	38
Portiuncula University Hospital	66	46	8	8	45	173
Sligo University Hospital	183	67	40	33	66	389
St. James's Hospital	53	38	31	14	64	200
St. John's Hospital Limerick	44	33	7	6	12	102
St. Luke's General Hospital Kilkenny	202	113	26	50	117	508
St. Michael's Hospital	38	24	7	7	42	118
St. Vincent's University Hospital	27	7			5	39
Tallaght University Hospital	57	35	18	27	31	168
University Hospital Kerry	11	5			7	23
University Hospital Limerick	74	45	37	15	43	214
University Hospital Waterford	74	41	17	24	98	254
Wexford General Hospital	12	15		10		37
Tipperary University Hospital	40	9			5	54
Coombe Women and Infants University Hospital	83	32	24		25	164
Small Volume Hospitals						9
Grand Total	1920	1117	503	507	1342	5389

\*Due to the small volume of patients waiting in certain specialties, to preserve patient confidentiality, when the number of patients is <5, these have been included within broader time bands or aggregated into a 'Small Volume Specialties' and 'Small Volume Hospitals' cohort.

### Hospital Services

226. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health if results of blood tests taken at accident and emergency can be accessed by the gynaecology department in Letterkenny University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45531/21]

**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

227. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting and the waiting times for urgent and routine MRI referrals in Letterkenny University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45532/21]

**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.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

228. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) in County Donegal will receive an appointment for hip surgery at Mayo University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45533/21]

**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**

229. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a child (details supplied) in County Donegal will receive a date for foot surgery; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45534/21]

**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.

*Question No. 230 answered with Question No. 225.*

*Question No. 231 answered with Question No. 225.*

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

232. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) in County Donegal will receive an appointment for a procedure in Beaumont Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45537/21]

**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**

233. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) in County Donegal will have a procedure undertaken in Galway University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45538/21]

**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**

234. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a child (details supplied) in County Donegal will receive an appointment for an operation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45539/21]

**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**

235. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if the treatment abroad scheme covers Irish citizens travelling to receive cancer treatments not available in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45544/21]

**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**

236. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if oncology drugs are covered under the treatment abroad scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45545/21]

**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

237. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if Irish patients receiving care abroad who have built up significant medical bills can avail of the treatment abroad scheme for their oncology drugs if they are not available in Ireland but are EMA and FDA approved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45546/21]

**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. 238 answered with Question No. 183.*

## Hospital Services

239. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of full and partial lower limb amputations that were carried out in 2020; the number of these patients who had diabetes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45551/21]

**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

240. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of full and partial lower limb amputations that were carried out in 2018, 2019 and 2020; the number of these patients who had diabetes by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45552/21]

**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

241. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients by county treated for foot ulcerations which do not require a full or partial limb amputation in 2020; the number of those patients who had diabetes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45553/21]

**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

242. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients under 65 years of age by county treated for foot ulcerations which did not require a full or partial limb amputation in 2020; the number of those patients who had diabetes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45554/21]

**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**

243. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of full and partial lower limb amputations that were carried out in 2020 by county on persons under 65 years of age; the number of these patients who had diabetes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45555/21]

**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**

244. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of bed days required by patients treated for foot ulcerations which do not require a full or partial limb amputation in 2018, 2019 and 2020; the number of those patients who had diabetes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45556/21]

**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**

245. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of hospital bed days required by patients treated for foot ulcerations which did not require a full or partial limb amputation in 2018, 2019 and 2020, by county; the number of those patients who had diabetes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45557/21]

**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**

246. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of hospital bed days required by patients undergoing full and partial lower limb amputations procedures on persons under 65 years of age in 2018, 2019 and 2020, by county in tabular form; the number of these patients who had diabetes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45558/21]

**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**

247. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of hospital bed days required by patients on persons under 65 years of age treated for foot ulcerations which did not require a full or partial limb amputation in 2018, 2019 and 2020, by county; the number of those patients who had diabetes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45559/21]

**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**

248. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of whole-time equivalent senior podiatrists and whole-time equivalent basic grade podiatrists employed by the Health Service Executive in 2018, 2019 and 2020, by CHO area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45560/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Procedures**

249. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of outpatient podiatry appointments delivered by hospital group in 2018, 2019 and 2020; the number of outpatient podiatry appointments delivered by hospital group to persons with diabetes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45561/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I note that the issue raised by the Deputy has been resubmitted, as due the Cyber attack in May, I was unable to refer the matter to the Health Service Executive when it was originally submitted.

As I noted the particular query raised, concerning the number of outpatient podiatry appointments delivered by hospital group in 2018, 2019 and 2020; the number of outpatient podiatry appointments delivered by hospital group to persons with diabetes is a service matter, and I have now asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Services**

250. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of podiatry appointments delivered by CHO area in 2018, 2019 and 2020; the number of podiatry appointments delivered by CHO area to persons with diabetes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45562/21]

**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.

### **Ambulance Service**

251. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the reason an ambulance did not collect a person (details supplied) as scheduled; if the case will be investigated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45563/21]

**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**

252. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health if an update will be provided on the plans in place for a facility (details supplied) given the date for the transfer of responsibility for the provision of disability and mental health services; the recent engagement there has been between stakeholders and families of service users; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45564/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** St John of God Community Services (SJOGCS) has agreed with the HSE that it will defer notice of its proposed exit from service provision on 1 October 2021.

The HSE and SJOGCS reached agreement on a process which aims to ensure the financial stability and sustainability and improved governance of the vital disability and mental health services provided across the country by SJOGCS. They will participate in a Sustainability Impact Assessment over the coming period.

As the Deputy's question relates to a service matter, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Dental Services**

253. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Health the number of dentists struck off the dental register by the Dental Council in each of the years 2018 to 2020 in CHO9. [45609/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The information sought by the Deputy is not held by my Department. The Dental Council, established under the Dentists Act 1985 is the regulatory body for the dental profession. The Dental Council deals with complaints concerning breaches of its Codes of Practice. The Dental Council publishes the results of Fitness to Practise Inquiries where allegations of professional misconduct against a dentist have been proven together with the sanctions imposed.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

254. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of an appointment for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45620/21]

**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.

### **Mental Health Services**

255. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health his plans to deal with the lack of mental health beds; his further plans to ensure that persons in need of secure psychiatric beds are not left in the criminal system due to a lack of availability of these beds; his views on such a case in County Tipperary in which instructions for bail could not be given to a person due to the fact there were no secure mental health beds available to allow this; if he will address the lack of mental health beds in general including secure mental health beds; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45622/21]

**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

256. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons awaiting a mental health bed; and the length of time they have been waiting for same. [45623/21]

**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.

### Civil Registration Service

257. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if he will give urgent attention to matters raised in correspondence (details supplied) regarding the Dublin civil registration office; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45636/21]

**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

258. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health when additional financial resources will be allocated to the regional drugs task forces, such as the north east regional task force in view of the increasing demand for such services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45661/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan) (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The funding allocated to Drug and Alcohol Task Forces at the beginning of 2021 is set out in the attached table and remains unchanged from 2020.

RDATF	2020 DOH	2020 HSE	Total
East Coast Area	€58,200	€518,500	€ 576,700
Midland	€136,816	€672,491	€ 809,307
Mid-West	€147,982	€1,270,007	€ 1,417,989
North East	€0	€937,813	€ 937,813
North West	€258,633	€471,730	€ 730,363
North Dublin City & Co.	€266,245	€521,019	€ 787,264
South East	€0	€1,075,760	€ 1,075,760
South West	€102,820	€706,497	€ 809,317
Southern	€0	€983,178	€ 983,178
Western	€136,994	€534,155	€ 671,149
Total RDATF	€ 1,107,690	€ 7,691,150	€ 8,798,840

€1 million was provided in additional funding in Budget 2021 for drug and alcohol task forces. It is intended that this funding will provide for the development of targeted drug and alcohol initiatives through the network of drug and alcohol task forces in 2021.

The North East Drug and Alcohol Task Force is the structure for coordinating drug and alcohol services Louth, Meath, Cavan and Monaghan and brings together statutory, voluntary and

community organisations, including service users. Following publication of the scoping report on community safety and wellbeing in Drogheda, I committed to providing €80,000 to improve the availability of drug and alcohol services in the North East region.

The priorities identified in the midterm review of the national drugs strategy, will inform the allocation of this funding. It is envisaged that a scheme for the disbursement of this funding will be developed in Quarter 4.

I am very supportive of the work of the Task Force and I look forward to receiving their proposal for identifying and responding to local needs in due course.

### **Disability Services**

259. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the details of the staffing levels including the number of persons in each role for each of the children's disability network teams operating in County Cork; the number of children each team has assigned to them; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45702/21]

**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**

260. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the steps he is taking to ensure each of the children's disability network teams has a sufficient number of physiotherapists to provide timely therapy to all children assigned to the team; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45703/21]

**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 Appointments Status**

261. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health if the situation of a young person (details supplied) will be addressed with regard to waiting for an MRI under general anaesthetic. [45704/21]

**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 Strategies**

262. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation plan of the new National Maternity Strategy; when the implementation plan will be published and made available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45727/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy may be aware, in the 2020 Overview report of HIQA's monitoring programme against the National Standards for Safer Better Maternity Services with a focus on obstetric emergencies, HIQA recommended that the HSE develop a comprehensive, time-bound and fully costed National Maternity Strategy implementation plan. On foot of that recommendation, the National Women & Infants Health Programme (NWIHP) has undertaken a revision of the original Implementation Plan for the Strategy with a view to developing a revised plan to cover the remainder of the Strategy's lifetime. This revised plan is currently in draft form and the Department continues to engage with the NWIHP to ensure the plan achieves the timely implementation of the Strategy's recommendations.

As the Programme is the body with responsibility for this process, I am referring your question to them for direct reply to you, as soon as possible.

### Health Promotion

263. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Health when Ireland will fully implement the WHO Code of Marketing for breastfeeding; the efforts which have been made to date to address ethical concerns regarding the advertisement of formula milk for babies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45729/21]

**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.

### National Maternity Hospital

264. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Health his views on the fact that the HSE board of members rejected the proposed governance structure of the new national maternity hospital for fear it will give control of the facility to a group (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45731/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Government is committed to the development of the new National Maternity Hospital (NMH) planned for the St Vincent's University Hospital Campus at Elm Park, as set out in the Programme for Government. Significant progress has been made on the capital project, with planning permission for the hospital secured in 2017 and, in 2018, the awarding of the contract for substantial enabling works.

As I have made clear previously, I am committed to ensure that there is no religious ethos brought to bear in the provision of public maternity and gynaecology services which would restrict the provision of all legally permissible services in the new hospital. I will not bring any proposal to Government unless it achieves this, and in addition, safeguards the State's investment in the new hospital.

The proposed corporate and clinical governance arrangements for the new National Maternity Hospital were set out in the Mulvey Agreement, which was finalised in 2016 following an extensive mediation process between the NMH and St. Vincent's Healthcare Group (SVHG). A

draft legal framework has been developed to copperfasten the clinical and operational independence of the new hospital, and to ensure the protection of the State's investment. The draft legal arrangements have of course been, and continue to be, the subject of very detailed consideration by the HSE Board, as would be expected. Work is ongoing to finalise the legal arrangements, as part of which I have engaged further with stakeholders. However, as I have clarified previously, I will not be making any further comment on the nature of this engagement until the process has concluded.

*Question No. 265 answered with Question No. 212.*

### **Health Services Staff**

266. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Health the number of the 24 lactation consultant posts that have been filled; the locations in which they have been made; if these positions have been filled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45745/21]

**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.

### **Agriculture Schemes**

267. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will provide clarification on a matter (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45280/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The person named submitted an application for the 2021 Areas of Natural Constraints scheme on 15th March 2021.

In order to qualify for payment under the scheme, an applicant must first satisfy a number of criteria in relation to their stocking levels. Applicants must satisfy a minimum stocking density of 0.15 livestock units per eligible forage hectare (the equivalent of one ewe per hectare) for seven consecutive months, as well as maintaining an annual average stocking density of 0.15 livestock units per eligible forage hectare for the 2021 calendar year.

While at the commencement of the issuing of 2021 ANC advance payments, the person named had not yet satisfied the stocking criteria set out above, I am pleased to confirm that they have since satisfied these requirements. The application has now been processed and payment will be lodged to the nominated bank account of the person named shortly.

### **Cybersecurity Policy**

268. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department's IT infrastructure is monitored for security breaches on a 24/7 basis; the guidance provided from Government on same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45304/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Department implements a security-by-design and defence-in-depth approach to cyber security

and has attained the industry security standard ISO27001 certification since 2019.

For operational and security reasons, the Department has been advised by the National Cyber Security Centre not to disclose details of the Department's cyber security arrangements. It is not considered appropriate to disclose particular arrangements in place in relation to IT security tools and services.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

269. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps taken by his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within his Department who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; his plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45361/21]

270. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps taken by agencies under the remit of his Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within these agencies who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; if there are plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45378/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 269 and 270 together.

I propose to take these PQs together which deal with the issue of remote working at Departmental and Agency level respectively.

Throughout the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, Government Departments and agencies have operated in line with the Government's public health guidance to work from home, where it was possible to do so. To facilitate this, my Department equipped the staff who could conduct their duties remotely with IT hardware and software, including laptops, phones and software licences. Many staff in various locations around the country, for example in meat plants, laboratories, IT support, Border Inspection Posts and Fishery Harbour Centres were deemed essential workers and continued to work from their normal place of employment to support these essential services.

The Department made provision for over 4,000 people (includes contracted staff) to have remotely working capabilities, while all staff have access to appropriate videoconferencing services.

As we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis, the Department is facilitating 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 involves 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 the state agencies under the aegis of my Department has been ongoing, with a view to facilitating a broad consistency of approach, and this engagement will be maintained

The information sought by the Deputy in relation to the support from the twelve State Bodies under the aegis of my Department on the implementation of the national remote work strategy, *Making Remote Work*, is an operational matter for the State Bodies themselves, and I have referred the question to them for direct reply.

*Question No. 270 answered with Question No. 269.*

### **Forestry Sector**

271. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a person (details supplied) in County Leitrim will receive a decision on their application for a tree felling licence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45612/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** An application for a tree felling licence, for the person named was received in February 2021. I understand the application was initially forwarded to the Department's Archaeology Unit and an archaeologist's report has been finalised. This application will now be processed by the Forestry District Inspector this week.

If any further information required, my Department will make contact directly with the applicant.

### **Agriculture Schemes**

272. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the degrees and qualifications his Department accepts in order to exempt persons from having to complete a green certificate to meet the requirements of a qualified farmer for the purposes of all of his Department and Revenue Commissioners schemes. [45700/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** For the purposes of meeting educational eligibility criteria for Trained Farmer status to qualify for Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine supports and Revenue exemptions, persons are required to hold an approved/ eligible qualification.

The current qualification listings can be found in Revenue Leaflet SD2B- Stamp Duty Ex-

emption – Transfers of Land to Young Trained Farmers. Awards in the fields of agriculture, horticulture, equine and forestry are deemed equal status in terms eligibility for Trained Farmer status.

### **Cybersecurity Policy**

273. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if her Department's IT infrastructure is monitored for security breaches on a 24/7 basis; the guidance provided from Government on same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45317/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department's ICT managed service is provided by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform through the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO).

The OGCIO's IT Infrastructure has a breadth of infrastructure monitoring in place and provides a 24/7 service. However, for operational security reasons, neither the OGCIO nor my Department is 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.

Guidance from Government in relation to ICT security is a matter for the National Cyber Security Centre.

### **Community Development Projects**

274. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she has plans to introduce a further tranche of community enhancement programme funding given that community centres are incurring additional expense as they move towards reopening within the public health restrictions of the day; the amounts paid to each local authority under the previous tranche of community enhancement programme funding announced in May 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45357/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** The **Community Enhancement Programme (CEP)** was first launched by my Department in 2018. The Programme provides funding to community groups and organisations across Ireland, with a focus on areas of disadvantage. Funding is provided to each Local Authority area, and the programme is administered by the Local Community Development Committees (LCDC) on the basis of local need.

Between 2018 and the end of 2020 the CEP funded over 8,000 projects across the country.

I launched the 2021 CEP on the 10th May with an allocation of €4.5m. The key theme was to support groups as they reopen facilities which were closed due to COVID-19. The 2021 CEP is now closed to applicants and depending on the Local Authority area, LCDCs have either assessed applications for funding or are assessing applications at present.

While there are currently no plans for another tranche of the CEP in 2021, I will consider allocating additional funding from other funding lines within my Department to support community centres and community groups as they move towards reopening.

The Funds allocated to each LCDC area for the 2021 CEP launched on 10th May is set out in the table below.

Questions - Written Answers

LCDC	2021 CEP
Carlow	€134,206
Cavan	€134,757
Clare	€139,257
Cork City	€153,703
Cork	€156,299
Donegal	€159,461
Dublin City	€212,306
Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown	€142,108
Fingal	€150,521
Galway City	€132,455
Galway County	€143,401
Kerry	€142,409
Kildare	€148,013
Kilkenny	€136,319
Laois	€136,524
Leitrim	€129,223
Limerick	€152,942
Longford	€132,385
Louth	€145,542
Mayo	€145,203
Meath	€142,893
Monaghan	€132,571
Offaly	€138,550
Roscommon	€133,301
Sligo	€134,084
South Dublin	€169,399
Tipperary	€149,690
Waterford	€144,499
Westmeath	€136,571
Wexford	€150,065
Wicklow	€141,343
Total	€4,500,000

### Flexible Work Practices

275. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the steps taken by her Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within her Department who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; her plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45374/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The civil service has developed a comprehensive Blended Working Policy Framework which is currently being discussed with employee representatives and which will guide Civil Service employers on how to roll out the measures required in order to put blended working in place on a permanent basis and develop their own Blended Working policies.

The Department, like other civil service employers, has plans to transition staff back to the office in late September 2021, on a staggered basis. It is intended that our enduring Blending Working policy will come into effect in April 2022. Currently, 100% of my Department's staff have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely

and this has been in place since March 2020 since the onset of the pandemic, and is established through the Office of Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO) under the Office of Government Procurement Framework (OGP).

### **Flexible Work Practices**

276. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the steps taken by agencies under the remit of her Department to support the implementation of the national remote work strategy Making Remote Work; the approximate number or percentage of staff within these agencies who have access to cloud services for remote videoconferencing and the capacity to work remotely; if there are plans to increase this percentage; the framework under which procurement for this is managed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45391/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The agencies under the remit of my Department are Pobal, Water Safety Ireland, the Western Development Commission and the Charities Regulatory Authority. All are independent legal entities, each with a Board of Management responsible for managing their own corporate affairs and staffing issues, including access to ICT supports, procurement and remote working arrangements.

### **Forbairt Calaí agus Céanna**

277. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den Aire Forbartha Tuaithe agus Pobail an bhfuil i gceist ag oifigigh na Roinne casadh le coiste (sonraí tugtha) go luath le forbairt na cé in Inis Meáin a phlé; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [45427/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Mar is eol don Teachta, is iad Comhairle Contae na Gaillimhe atá freagrach as céim a trí d'fhorbairt an Chaladh Mhóir ar Inis Meáin. Tá oifigigh mo Roinne i dteagmháil rialta leis an gComhairle Contae chun dul chun cinn a dhéanamh ar an togra.

I mí Iúil thaistil grúpa chuig ionad an NMCI (National Marine College of Ireland) i gCorcaigh, áit ar tugadh taispeántas den ionsamhlú mara atá dá fhorbairt acu. Tuigim go raibh ionadaí ón gcoiste atá luaite ag an Teachta ina measc.

Tar éis seisiúin aiseolais, aontaíodh go ndéanfaidh an NMCI tuilleadh forbairt ar an ionsamhlú, chun torthaí níos cuimsitheach a fháil, agus nuair atá sé sin déanta, seolfar cuireadh eile chuig na hionadaithe cuí. Is féidir liom a dheimhniú go bhfuil mo chuid oifigigh ar fáil chun bualadh le hionadaithe ón gcoiste ag aon am atá feiliúnach dhóibh.

### **Tidy Towns**

278. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will ensure a tidy towns grant is awarded to a group (details supplied). [45479/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I was delighted to be in a position to launch the 2021 Supervalu Tidy Towns competition on 21st May last and look forward to the award ceremony later in the year. In my view, Tidy Towns is a wonderful competition. It reaches in to practically every town and village in the country and

promotes a sense of community and identity as well as instilling a sense of pride in that home town or village.

Last December, I announced funding of €1 million to help Tidy Towns groups to prepare for the 2021 competition. This translated to a provision of up to €1,000 to every eligible Tidy Towns group in the country and represented a top-up to the €1.4 million distributed to groups at the end of 2019.

In order to be eligible for this funding, a group must have entered the competition in any of the years 2017, 2018 or 2019. The group to which the Deputy refers had not entered the competition since 2009 and was not therefore eligible for the funding.

However, I have reviewed the position based on a review of entries to the competition this year. I am happy to say that any new and active Tidy Towns Group that did not enter the competition in the period 2017-2019, but who are confirmed as having entered this year's competition, are now eligible to apply for the €1,000 grant. Eligible groups will be contacted very shortly regarding the application process for this funding.

### **Cycling Facilities**

279. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will consider extending the three year bike pilot initiative for the provision of high-quality upcycled bicycles and e-bikes for those on low incomes and or those who are most marginalised and disadvantaged to Limerick city given it is the only large city not included in the pilot; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45543/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** On 28 April, my Department, in collaboration with the Department of Transport, launched a three year pilot initiative for the provision of high quality up-cycled bicycles and e-bikes, for those on low incomes and or those who are most marginalised and disadvantaged.

Funding of up to €3m is being provided by the Department of Transport for this initiative over a three year period and will be made available through my Department's Community Services Programme, which is administered by Pobal.

The application process for this call closed on 28th May last. The Department received fourteen applications, with five applicants approved for support under this pilot initiative.

Organisations that were eligible to apply were those currently supported under the Community Services Programme or, alternatively, those in a Partnership/Consortium of which at least one member is currently a CSP supported organisation. While one application was received from a Limerick-based organisation, unfortunately, this applicant failed to meet the required eligibility criteria for the pilot.

Progress on the roll-out of this pilot initiative will be kept under review.