

## 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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*Question Nos. 1 to 6, inclusive, answered orally.*

### Freedom of Information

7. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the remit for his review of the freedom of information system by the terms of reference, stakeholders to be consulted; the proposed date of publication of its findings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45419/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I would like to thank the Deputy for the question and am glad to have this opportunity to provide to this House further details on the upcoming review of the Freedom of Information Act.

My Department will in the coming weeks publish a roadmap document that will set out in detail the process for the review and give detailed information on how interested stakeholders can get involved.

My firm belief is that we should be seeking to promote a collaborative approach not only to the review process, but also to “doing transparency” more broadly. We should recognise that all stakeholders, from the public sector to the media, academia, activists and interest groups, as well as individual requesters, have a role to play in delivering effective and meaningful state transparency for the Irish public, and must work together to achieve that goal.

The remit and outcomes of the review will be driven by evidence. The review will accordingly seek inputs from the broadest possible range of stakeholders throughout the process. It is planned that public consultation will take place later this year, which will largely determine the scope of the review. I would urge all interested parties to take this opportunity to make their voices heard and to define the issues that will be considered in the review.

Following the scoping consultation, my Department will prepare and publish a document setting out the issues that have been identified. This document will be published and a further consultation will take place early in the new year that will allow stakeholders the opportunity to make detailed submissions based on the themes that have been identified. These submissions will be central to the outcome of the review.

Alongside the public consultation process, my Department will undertake focused and targeted information gathering, driven by any knowledge gaps identified as the review progresses.

Two particular projects have already been identified as necessary and will commence later in the year. Firstly, a customer satisfaction survey will be undertaken to assess the attitudes of

requesters and staff members of public bodies towards the FOI process. Secondly, a project that aims to assess the cost of FOI, so that we can have a clear picture of the resourcing demands that are required to operate the system as it currently stands.

In addition, the review will consider international good practice and developments and seek to take account of the transformation in the manner in which people interact with information since the 2014 Act came into force.

Finally, as a key sectoral stakeholder with a unique and unrivalled understanding of the operation of the Freedom of Information Act, my Department will consult with the Office of the Information Commissioner on an ongoing basis as the review progresses.

By the middle of next year, my Department will be in a position to prepare a report for publication setting out the findings and recommendations of the review.

*Questions Nos. 8 and 9 answered orally.*

### **Public Procurement Contracts**

10. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will provide an outline of recent communications with the Minister for Health pertaining to the scale of non-competitive and non-compliant procurement practices by the HSE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45498/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** In July 2021, officials from HSE Procurement presented to the interim Procurement Reform Board on the HSE's self-assessment of procurement performance in 2020. While the Board welcomed the provision of the assessment, they raised concerns with the figures presented and the Board's Chairman subsequently wrote to me to advise me of the situation.

The HSE's self-assessment was that 63% (€1.25 billion) of its analysed procurement spend in 2020 was not competitively procured. Of this, €111.6m of non-Covid expenditure was declared to be non-compliant with public procurement regulations and €108.4m of non-Covid expenditure was declared to be awarded following a non-competitive practice.

While I wish to acknowledge that the health service and its procurement function faced extraordinary challenges during the pandemic, non-competitive and non-compliant procurement risks value for the public, exposes the State to the risk of legal challenge, and falls short of the requirements under national and European law and Government policy.

Accordingly, on the 9th August, I wrote to the Minister for Health, outlining the scale of the issue and expressing my concerns. While responsibility for this lies with the Minister for Health's department, as Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, I am concerned that my Department's expenditure and procurement policies are correctly applied.

I have requested that the Minister for Health provide me with an update on the arrangements, actions and targets being undertaken by his department, in conjunction with the HSE and the health providers it funds, to put in place appropriate measures to make progress on procurement performance. I have indicated that officials from my department, including the Chief Procurement Officer and his staff, are available to provide guidance and support. I have also asked that the interim Procurement Reform Board to remain apprised on this matter.

*Questions Nos. 11 to 13, inclusive, answered orally.*

## **Antisocial Behaviour**

14. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will provide an overview of the way his Department proposes to deal with ongoing vandalism and desecration of graves at Clare Abbey, Ennis, County Clare. [45585/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The Commissioners of Public Works have previously been in discussions with Clare County Council and members of the local community regarding vandalism at Clare Abbey and the desecration of graves at the site. I had the opportunity to meet with the Council and the local community along with my officials from the OPW at Clare Abbey in December 2020.

Following my visit the discussions took place on the installation of CCTV and floodlighting. Both were considered but neither were deemed appropriate. The issues surrounding the CCTV are the power supply, cabling, archaeology as well as who would be responsible for supervising and curating the system. While wires-free options were also considered, there are a number of logistical issues associated with them, not least, compliance with GDPR legislation, which would need to be overcome. Floodlights would cause light pollution and can also be an attractor to antisocial behaviour.

The Commissioners have hired a local caretaker and he is calling daily to monitor the site. A passive visitor counter has also been placed on the site to track visitor movements, and there has been ongoing engagement with An Garda Síochána in relation to the security of the site. I understand the Commissioners of Public Works are not aware of any current vandalism at Clare Abbey or desecration of graves.

In recent years there have been increases in reports of damage to archaeological monuments. The OPW and the National Monuments Service of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage have, in recent times, taken proactive measures to negate this trend. Some of the damage is caused by visitor behaviour and a general lack of awareness of the significance of the monuments.

Following discussion with colleagues in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, an online joint awareness campaign about protecting archaeological and built heritage was developed and run throughout July and August 2021. The aim was to address information gaps and lack of understanding of the impact certain behaviour is having to both archaeological monuments in State care and monuments in private ownership. The focus of the campaign was to raise awareness of the value, importance and uniqueness of Ireland's archaeological heritage together with conveying the key messages for visitor behaviour at archaeological monuments.

The primary audience for this campaign was young people (18-30 years old) who may be unaware of the damage they may be causing to a site, either above or below ground. This was primarily a digital and social media campaign including three animated videos but also included a leaflet setting out the key issues that was distributed to stakeholders across the country.

## **EU Funding**

15. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the funding that the Exchequer will receive from the EU Brexit Adjustment Reserve; the expected timeframe for receipt of that funding; if he proposes to initiate a consultation process regarding the distribution of this funding; and the other proposals he plans to present in this regard. [44746/21]

26. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the work on determining the disbursement of Ireland's allocation of over €1 billion from the Brexit Adjustment Fund; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45438/21]

53. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the work on determining the disbursement of Ireland's allocation of over €1 billion from the Brexit Adjustment Reserve Fund; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45211/21]

59. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the Brexit Adjustment Fund; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45424/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 15, 26, 53 and 59 together.

At the end of June agreement was reached between the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers on the European Commission's proposal for a Brexit Adjustment Reserve.

The Reserve has a total value of €5 billion in constant (2018) prices, or €5.47 billion in current prices. All Member States are to receive a provisional allocation.

I am pleased to say that Ireland has been allocated €1.065 billion in constant (2018) prices, equivalent to €1.165 billion in current prices. This represents 21% of the total value of the Reserve, the largest allocation for any Member State.

The reference period for expenditure under the Reserve runs from 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2023.

80% of the total Reserve will be made available as pre-financing in three instalments: 40% in 2021; 30% in 2022; 30% in 2023. The remaining 20% will be made available in 2025 once Member States have accounted to the Commission for expenditure under the Reserve. In Ireland's case, the bulk of expenditure will be in the form of pre-financing.

The objective of Reserve is to provide support to counter the adverse economic, social, territorial and, where appropriate, environmental consequences of the withdrawal of the UK from the EU. Importantly, the Reserve may only support measures specifically taken by Member States to contribute to this objective.

In Ireland's case, the allocation of resources from the Reserve will be aligned with the annual Estimates process. Ireland has already spent a considerable amount on preparing for Brexit, with successive budgets since the UK referendum providing significant supports for business and the agri-food sectors, as well as the infrastructure required at the port and airport to maintain the flow of east west trade.

Possible areas for support under Reserve include enterprise supports; supports for the agri-food sector; fisheries; reskilling and retraining; and infrastructure for the ports and airport.

In line with the requirements of the BAR Regulation, a Designated Body will be established within my Department to oversee expenditure under the Reserve.

## **Flood Risk Management**

16. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the Glashaboy flood relief scheme; the status of the tender process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45413/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** I am pleased to provide an update on the progression of the Glashaboy River Flood Relief Scheme at Glanmire / Sallybrook, Cork. This scheme was confirmed on 18th January 2021 by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, pursuant to Section 7 of Arterial Drainage Act, 1945, and of all other powers enabling him in that behalf. The confirmation is subject to the conditions that were agreed to by the Commissioners for Public Works in Ireland who are the Approving Authority for the scheme.

The twelve week period for judicial review expired on 12th April 2021 without receipt of any objections. The procurement to appoint the civil works contractor for this scheme is being progressed. I am advised by Cork City Council, as the contracting authority for this flood relief scheme, that it expects to invite tenders for this Civil Work contract in the coming weeks.

The scheme will provide protection to some 103 properties; 78 residential properties and 25 commercial premises. The scheme will address the flood risk in a number of locations in the Glanmire area and will include defences, such as walls and embankments; culvert upgrades; channel widening and road re-grading.

The flood relief scheme is being funded from the Government's €1 billion investment for flood risk management over the period of the National Development Plan 2018-2027, as part of Project Ireland 2040. Provision for the cost of the Scheme is included in the Office of Public Works' multi annual capital allocation.

A Project Steering Committee with representatives from Cork City and County Councils and the OPW is in place, meeting monthly with the engineering consultants to steer and oversee the delivery of this project.

I know that this next stage of appointing a Civil Works contractor and progressing to construction is welcomed by the residents who have been affected by flooding in Glanmire. In addition, my Office and officials in Cork City Council are working closely with other State bodies, including Irish Water to ensure that all of the flood risk in the area is being addressed.

Finally, I would like to reassure the residents and business owners in Glanmire, that as with flood relief schemes completed in other towns, this scheme will provide the standard of protection against significant fluvial flood events.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

17. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which civil service personnel are likely to continue remote working; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45453/21]

24. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his policy on blended working in the Civil Service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45713/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 17 and 24 together.

You will be aware that the Government has committed in the Programme for Government to mandating public sector employers to move to 20% home and remote working.

In July, 2021 the Government approved a Policy Statement on Blended Working in the Civil Service, which was produced by my Department and agreed by the Civil Service Management

Board. The Policy Statement commits the Civil Service to implementing a policy of blended working for the future that can provide flexibility to both employees and their employers in a manner that supports the continued delivery of high quality services to Government, the public and business while providing employees, where appropriate, with choice and opportunity.

Remote working in the Civil Service, post pandemic, will be facilitated on a blended basis. In this context, Officials in my Department have been working with, and continue to work with employers across the Civil and Public Service to develop a Blended Working Policy Framework for the Civil Service. This Framework focuses on the longer-term approach to remote working in the sector and can assist in providing a consistent approach across the wider public sector. The Framework will be finalised over the coming months, following engagement with employee representatives. When this engagement has concluded and the Framework is agreed, it will be rolled out to all civil service organisations. The Framework will provide consistency on certain issues and inform the development of organisational blended working policies which will be tailored to meet the specific requirements of each Department/Office.

### **Harbours and Piers**

18. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the position regarding the provision of an improved landing facility on An Blascaod Mór; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45698/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** An Blascaod Mór is a nationally significant heritage site due to the important literary and cultural output of its tiny community in the first half of the 20th century and the substantial collection of books – nearly 100 in all - that have been written about life on the Blasket Islands in the past century. An Blascaod Mór is also part of the Blasket Islands Special Area of Conservation with the highest level of environmental protection. The State purchased the majority of the holdings on the island in 2009 and the OPW has restored a number of the houses on the island since then. Ionad an Bhlascaoid, (the Blasket Centre), located on the mainland at Dun Chaoin, was built in 1993 as a cultural centre to present and interpret the extraordinary cultural and literary heritage of the Blasket Islands to visitors. It receives in excess of 100,000 visitors per annum and is currently being substantially upgraded by the Office of Public Works with support from Fáilte Ireland as a flagship visitor destination on the Wild Atlantic Way.

The Great Blasket Island, An Blascaod Mór, is a key visitor destination for the Dingle Peninsula. In 2018, the OPW introduced a guided visitor service on the Island and in 2019 almost 10,000 visitors were recorded as having visited the Island. Ferries operate from Dún Chaoin, Ceann Trá and Dingle but landing facilities for visitors arriving to the Island are very basic and require the transhipment of passengers by dinghy from ferry to a slipway on the island. The provision of improved landing facilities at An Blascaod Mór has been an objective of successive governments for many years and improvement of access facilities is an objective of the Fáilte Ireland Visitor Development Experience Plan published earlier this year.

Improved landing facilities, whereby boats could embark and disembark passengers directly to the island are desirable for two reasons: one being safety and the other as an essential element in the sustainable management of the island from heritage, tourism and environmental points of view. While ferry services are confined to licensed vessels with specific tender permits, it is not currently possible to manage access and visitor numbers to achieve a balance between sustainable tourism access and maintaining the fragile environmental balance of the island.

Planning permission was granted to Kerry County Council in 2003 for a pier at An Blascaod

Mór but this project did not proceed at the time. The OPW has been advised by Kerry County Council that a fresh process of securing planning for a pier would now be required given changed circumstances concerning environmental protection in the interim.

The OPW has engaged with key stakeholders including Fáilte Ireland, Kerry County Council and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in recent years to agree a way to progress the planning of a revised project for An Blascaod Mór. The OPW also made a funding application to the Rural Regeneration Development Fund in 2019 to secure funds to bring to planning a suitable proposal for a new pier at An Blascaod More but this application was not successful. I assure the Deputy that this project continues to be one of great importance to the OPW in order to secure safe access for visitors and to protect the unique landscape of the Island into the future.

### **Heritage Sites**

19. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the future use of St. Laurence's Gate, Drogheda; if costings and feasibility reports have been undertaken in respect of opening the landmark for public tours and so on to further encourage tourism into the town centre; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45495/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** As indicated to the Deputy in a previous Parliamentary Reply, the Office of Public Works has facilitated limited, controlled access to St Laurence Gate in recent years, for community events such as the Fleadh and Art's Festival. At these occasions, access was strictly ticketed due to the physical constraints within the monument and general health and safety concerns. Facilitating this access placed a considerable demand on resources, as Office of Public Works staff provided the stewarding within the monument on all of those occasions.

A substantial conservation project would be required to address the issues identified at St. Laurence's Gate, as per the recent Office of Public Works commissioned structural report which was widely shared with local public representatives. While these works have not been quantified in terms of cost The Office of Public Works do not, at present, have the resources to carry out this work. However, it should be noted that if the monument was to be opened to the public on a regular basis all elements highlighted in the Structural Report would need to be addressed.

As with all National Monuments in the State care, OPW will continue to monitor and carry out routine maintenance on this monument in line with legislative obligation.

### **Public Sector Staff**

20. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he is satisfied with the process of Government appointments in light of the recently aborted appointment of a former Minister to a UN position; and his views on whether the Public Service Management (Recruitment and Appointment) Act 2004 needs to be amended in this regard. [45415/21]

28. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** 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. [45587/21]

75. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his views on whether the Top Level Appointments Committee should have a role in the recruitment of special envoys to ensure that the full details of any future appointments to be shared in advance and adequately considered in a proper way; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45500/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 20, 28 and 75 together.

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. The members of the review committee will include senior officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs, the CEO of PAS and a management consultant who was formerly a Chair of TLAC. The review will look at the role and appointment of special envoys internationally; the role, status and work of special envoys appointed by Ireland to date; terms and conditions and value for money of special envoys appointed by Ireland; examine best practice in public

appointments procedures in Ireland; consult with stakeholders in Ireland, the EU and other countries; and make recommendations on an appropriate model for the future appointment of special envoys in Ireland based on a transparent and competitive process.

### **Capital Expenditure Programme**

21. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the plans he has in place to review the oversight and governance of major spending projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45656/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I should first explain that as Minister for Public Expenditure & Reform I am responsible for setting the overall multi-annual capital expenditure ceilings for each Ministerial Vote Group as set out in the National Development Plan and Project Ireland 2040. My Department is also responsible for maintaining the national frameworks within which Departments operate to ensure appropriate accounting for and value for money in public expenditure such as the Public Spending Code. The Public Spending Code sets the value for money requirements and guidance for evaluating, planning and managing capital projects. Management and delivery of investment projects and public services within allocation and the national frameworks is a key responsibility of every Department and Minister.

The Public Spending Code is not static and was updated in 2019 following an extensive consultation process. This update has strengthened the guidance to better align with the realities of project delivery and with a particular focus on improved appraisal, cost estimation and management. In line with the principle of proportionality, the requirements for smaller projects have been streamlined and the requirements for larger projects support a better consideration of options, risks, costs and deliverability.

The updated Public Spending Code brings a renewed focus to:

- Robust options appraisal to support identification of the most efficient and effective option to achieve the identified objective;
- Gaining a more developed view of costs, risks and timeframes before committing to proceed with a project;
- Tighter governance of key decision points during project preparation and delivery;
- Ongoing updating of the business case for a project as it proceeds through design and planning phases; and
- Continued scrutiny of affordability throughout the process.

As part of the ongoing reform of the Public Spending Code and as one of the work streams of the review of the National Development Plan, my Department is developing a strengthened external assurance process for major projects with an estimated cost of over €100 million. This will involve an independent review of major projects at two key stages in the project life-cycle, specifically when the preferred delivery option is chosen and before approval is given to go to tender. The reviews will be conducted by independent experts in infrastructure delivery. The application of external review process will be the responsibility of approving authorities, the spending Departments in the main, and their Accounting Officers in order to rigorously assess business cases that have been issued to them from their Sponsoring Agencies. The responsibility will be on approving authorities to tender for the external review from a framework of

experts and to ensure the feedback from the review is reflected in any updated business case.

The reviews will consider key issues including:

- Robustness of planned delivery;
- Accuracy of cost forecasts;
- Consideration of risk; and
- Appropriateness of procurement strategies.

In addition, a Major Projects Advisory Group is being established to support my Department's role within the overall project assurance process. The Group will support my Department in assimilating the outputs from the external reviews, informed by the perspective of those who have successfully delivered major public infrastructure in Ireland.

The detail of the process and arrangements for implementation will be delivered in Q4 2021.

## **Regional Development**

22. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the measures he plans to put in place to deal with the under investment in the Northern and Western Regional Assembly areas and to move the region from a region in transition; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45653/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Balanced regional development is a key priority of this Government and this priority is at the heart of Project Ireland 2040. This strategic plan includes the National Planning Framework, which sets the overarching spatial strategy for the next twenty years, along with the National Development Plan which is currently in the process of being reviewed and is due for publication shortly.

Ensuring close alignment between the two is necessary in order to accommodate a projected 1 million additional people by 2040 across Ireland's three regional assembly areas. The plan aims to ensure that 75% of growth takes place outside Dublin. One of the objectives of the review of the National Development Plan, is to ensure the alignment of investment with that strategy in order to promote regional development as planned.

The three Regional Assemblies are responsible for co-ordinating, promoting and supporting the strategic planning and sustainable development of their regions, by formulating Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies. The strategy for the Northern and Western Region has set out the priorities for the region based on the County Development Plans being integrated into a regional investment plan which is expected to be a major driver of the implementation of the NPF. Investment decisions made by Departments are informed by the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies.

A report on the Northern and Western Region will be published alongside the new NDP. The report details the specific regional projects and programmes which are being delivered in the North-West as part of the public investment detailed in Project Ireland 2040.

In addition, my Department publishes a major capital projects tracker, which sets out details of the key projects and programmes being implemented under the NDP, including the location of the projects. The Tracker includes a number of major projects directly related to the Northern and Western region.

**Office of Public Works**

23. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if there has been engagement with the Department of Community and Rural Development in relation to vacant buildings owned or under the remit of the OPW; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45699/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** I can confirm that my officials in the OPW have had several discussions with the Department of Community and Rural Development in relation to vacant buildings owned or under the remit of the OPW. As the Deputy may be aware, the Office of Public Works (OPW) manages and maintains a substantial and complex estate - approximately 2,500 properties -- valued at around €3.3 billion.

It is a diverse portfolio that includes office accommodation for all Government Departments, the property estate for An Garda Síochána and numerous properties for many State Agencies. The portfolio also houses specialised spaces such as public offices, laboratories, cultural institutions, warehouses, heritage properties, visitor centres and sites.

In any major portfolio, there will always be a certain level of vacant properties. Not all vacant properties are deemed surplus to the State's requirements or deemed suitable for disposal.

The OPW, like other State bodies, is obliged to follow central Government policies and protocols on the disposal of surplus properties.

As a matter of policy, no property or site is disposed of until there is absolute certainty that there is no alternative State use for that property.

The OPW's approach to managing vacant properties is **firstly**, to establish if the property is needed for alternative State use; if it can be re-purposed for Government Departments or the wider public service.

A number of strategic properties or sites are retained in case of future State use or development. We have to be in a position to meet demands arising from Government policy changes to public service provision.

**Secondly**, if no State use is identified, the OPW considers open market disposal – depending on market conditions.

**Thirdly**, we may consider community involvement, depending on a detailed submission showing that a community or voluntary group can insure, maintain and manage the property.

The Office of Public Works (OPW) has had a disposal programme in place for many years, which is a normal part of managing any large property portfolio. **In 2014**, there were **almost 240** vacant surplus properties, including the 139 closed stations.

Since **2014**, the number of vacant and surplus properties reduced to **102 properties**. **This reduction includes 125 income generating disposals** - generating income in excess of **€22million** for the Exchequer. Included in the remaining 102 surplus properties is 37 of the 139 Garda stations that were closed in 2012 and 2013. The disposal programme for these specific properties began in January 2014, but was delayed because of a request from An Garda Síochána in 2016 to postpone further disposals while two policing reviews were undertaken. The Reviews by AGS were completed in December 2018 and the OPW restarted the disposal process in January 2019. The programme of disposals was further interrupted by Covid-related lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, though the OPW progressed a number of transfers or disposals where it was

feasible.

A number of public auctions are planned to the end of 2021, subject to pandemic restrictions, with 4 planned for 2022.

The OPW has provided a list of surplus properties to the Department of Rural and Community Development to consider their suitability for future community or other use.

In May of this year, my officials wrote to 12 local authorities advising them of the Town and Village Renewal Scheme funding that is available from the Department of Community and Rural Development. This arose from engagement between my officials and the Department in relation to this opportunity to renew some of the State's vacant stock and improve the landscape in towns and villages around the country.

My officials offered the local authorities an option to lease or purchase 24 of the 37 remaining former Garda station properties for community use, with a view to them applying to the Department to avail of the funding necessary to refurbish the properties.

To-date, 6 local authorities have responded with an expression of interest for former Garda station properties. Heads of Terms have issued on a number of them with a view to progressing leases through the Office of the Chief State Solicitor.

*Question No. 24 answered with Question No. 17.*

### **Appointments to State Boards**

25. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his views on the work to improve the diversity of State boards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45411/21]

38. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the progress being made to strengthen gender diversity on State boards across the public sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45688/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 25 and 38 together.

I am committed to ensuring that we continue to build diversity within our State boards. This will be both better reflective of modern Ireland and also ensure we draw on the widest diversity of talent for better governance of our State bodies.

In terms of gender diversity, on foot of the 2019 Inter-Departmental Group report on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion on State Boards, the Deputy may be aware that in September 2020 I published an Annex to the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies. The Annex deals with Gender Balance, Diversity and Inclusion. Provisions included in this Annex are specifically aimed at improving diversity on State boards such as reducing the board terms, and facilitating greater turnover of Board members.

In addition, the annual Chairperson's comprehensive report to the relevant Minister must set out progress being made in addressing gender equality and diversity issues; where the boards stands vis-à-vis the 40% gender balance requirements; measures being taken to address where the 40% requirements are not met and specifically measures being taken to address the situation where a board is either all male or all female.

Most importantly each board should carry out an annual self-assessment evaluation and this process should incorporate a detailed analysis and critical assessment of the gender, diversity and skills mix within the board, including where relevant a critical assessment of the reasons why gender balance in Board membership has not yet been achieved.

I am pleased to be able to report that there has been some progress in gender diversity on State Boards. An analysis carried out by my Department in June 2021 on 203 State Boards showed that there were 2,085 serving board members and the gender participation rates are 44.70% female (December 2018: 41.5%) and 55.34% male (December 2018: 58.50%), with 50.74% of Boards (December 2018: 47.6%) now meeting the 40% gender targets.

In terms of broader aspects of diversity on State Boards, since 2014 all appointments to State boards are managed by the Public Accounts Committee (PAS) and advertised on the website *stateboards.ie*. PAS have led on a number of activities to raise awareness about State boards, the process and who can apply, in order to increase the diversity of the boards. PAS regularly use social media and radio campaigns to promote individual campaigns and in order to reach a national audience and inform the general public about the process for appointment to State Boards. Information evenings have also been hosted in regional locations (Athlone, Cork, Galway, Dublin). I understand that PAS are considering further measures to broaden diversity and my Department will continue to engage with them on this important objective.

*Question No. 26 answered with Question No. 15.*

### **Departmental Expenditure**

27. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the amount of the State's expenditure in 2022 that will be allocated by way of competitive bidding for resources based on the quality or innovation of proposals; the Departments that make least use of such models; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44808/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** There is no central allocation of public funds by way of competitive bidding based on quality or innovation of proposals. The accounting officer of each public body is responsible for determining what portion of their allotted budget will be so allocated. All Irish public bodies are obliged to spend or invest public funds with care, and to ensure that optimal value for money is obtained in accordance with the Public Spending Code which sets out the rules and procedures to ensure that these standards are upheld across the Irish public service.

Section 19 of the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act, 1993, provides that each Accounting Officer is responsible for the safeguarding of public funds and property under his or her control; for the regularity and propriety of all the transactions in each Appropriation Account bearing his or her signature; and for the efficiency and economy of administration in his or her Department.

The Office of Government Procurement (OGP), an office with my Department, publishes the Public Procurement Guidelines For Goods and Services to guide contracting authorities on the use of public procurement procedures. The Guidelines advise that contracts should be awarded on the basis of MEAT (most economically advantageous tender) in accordance with the 2016 Procurement Regulations (S.I. No. 284/2016 - European Union (Award of Public Authority Contracts) Regulations 2016). This typically means a combination of price and quality where quality might include factors such as delivery date or period of completion, delivery process, running costs, aesthetic and functional characteristics, accessibility, and technical merit. The

Guidelines also provide information on the use of innovation procurement for public bodies.

The following table illustrates figures for MEAT and Cost only for awards for 50 OGP central arrangements:

OGP Frameworks	2019 & 2020
% assessed on MEAT	98%
% assessed on Cost only	2%
MEAT – mean quality	60

*Question No. 28 answered with Question No. 20.*

### Capital Expenditure Programme

29. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will provide an update on the under-profile and outturn of capital expenditure to date in 2021; if he will provide an update on the revised National Development Plan; if the National Development Plan will address the recent IPCC report and set out clear plans and targets with respect to climate action; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45499/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As the Deputy will be aware, the drawdown of capital expenditure from the Exchequer is detailed each month and is publically available in the Fiscal Monitor, which is published on the gov.ie website. All line Departments and agencies submit information on their expenditure levels against profile to my Department, along with an explanation outlining details regarding any variance of under or over spending against profile.

The latest capital expenditure figures available to end-August reveal that the net capital spend, including capital carryover, was €4,153 million. When the carryover amount is omitted, the net capital spend amounts to €3,726 million, which is 14.8% or €649 million behind the profiled amount of €4,375 million, with all but one Department declaring underspends against profile.

While there was an impact on building activity earlier this year, due to Covid restrictions, activity in the sector has ramped up significantly since sites re-opened when restrictions were lifted in April. With this increased activity, Departments generally expect spending to realign with profiled expenditure as the year progresses.

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 and healthcare.

The revised NDP will address the recent IPCC report and in recognition of the importance of the climate objectives for the Government in the coming years, through the renewal of the Climate Action Plan and the new Climate Bill, the impact on climate and the environment will take a more central role within the new NDP. It will be important to ensure that the NDP is consistent with recent and upcoming commitments from the Irish Government to become carbon

neutral by 2050 and to meet the more immediate climate targets by 2030.

## Public Sector Pay

30. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if all public sector workers will be receiving a pay rise on 1 October 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45686/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Section 3.1.3 of Building Momentum - A New Public Service Agreement 2021-2022 provides for a general round increase in annualised basic salary for all public servants of 1% or €500, whichever is greater, on October 2021.

Under section 19 of the Public Service Pay and Pensions Act 2017, public servants with annualised basic salaries of up to €150,000 were due full FEMPI restoration on 1 July 2021. This brought the proportion of public servants whose salaries have been restored to pre-FEMPI levels to 99%. Those with annualised basic salaries of over €150,000 will be due full FEMPI restoration on 1 July 2022, in line with section 20 of the Act.

Section 3.1.4. of Building Momentum states that public servants who are due an amount of pay restoration in 2021 or 2022, under Section 19 and 20 of the Public Service Pay and Pensions Act 2017, respectively, will not receive the general round increase in that year. However, if the amount of restoration due is less than the general round increase, they will be paid the balance on the date of the general round increase.

The benefits of the Agreement will be confined to those employees represented by unions in membership of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions or other unions or representative associations which have notified the WRC of their intention to comply with the Agreement. The vast majority of public service unions have signed up to the public service Agreement.

## EU Funding

31. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45714/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The National Recovery and Resilience Plan will enable Ireland to access funding under the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility, which lies at the heart of the Union's €800 billion *NextGenerationEU* recovery package.

The aim of *NextGenerationEU* is to help repair the immediate economic and social damage brought about by the pandemic and prepare for a post-Covid Europe that is greener, more digital, more resilient and fit to face the future.

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan has been developed by the Government in close cooperation with the European Commission, taking into account the RRF prioritisation of green and digital transition and the challenges identified as part of the European Semester process.

The Plan has a total value of €990 million. Its overall objective is to contribute to a sustainable, equitable, green and digital recovery, in a manner that complements and supports the Government's broader recovery effort. It is aligned with domestic policies, notably the Economic

Recovery Plan and the National Development Plan.

The Plan is based on twenty five investment projects and reform measures spanning three priority areas addressing green and digital transition, along with social and economic recovery and job creation.

Ireland's draft Plan was submitted to the European Commission on 28 May 2021. On 16 July 2021 Commission President Ursula von der Leyen travelled to Dublin to present the Commission's positive assessment of the Plan to the Taoiseach. The Plan was then considered by ECOFIN on 6 September 2021, and a Council Implementing Decision was adopted by written procedure on 8 September 2021.

On 21 September 2021 I met Economy Commissioner Paolo Gentiloni to discuss our Plan and we both took part in an online stakeholder event hosted by the Institute of International and European Affairs.

Now that the Implementing Decision has been adopted by the Council, the Plan will be the subject of a Financing Agreement between the Commission and Ireland.

## **Budget 2022**

32. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he has held discussions with the Minister for Finance with regard to the need to raise additional revenue to fund permanent current expenditure increases given his intention that Government borrowing would only be for capital investment purposes by 2023 as stated in his recent updates to the Cabinet on Expenditure Management and Spending Strategy for Budget 2022 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45497/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As outlined in the Summer Economic Statement (SES), anchoring core expenditure growth to an appropriate trend growth rate for the economy of c. 5% per annum, along with a phased unwinding of the exceptional Covid-19 expenditure, can provide a pathway back to a more sustainable budgetary position, while also providing the necessary resources to enhance our public services, social supports and infrastructure.

In line with the expenditure strategy laid out in the SES the expenditure ceiling for 2022 will be €88.2 billion, €80.1 billion of which will be for core expenditure. This amounts to a €4.2 billion or 5.5% increase in core expenditure, comprising €3.1 billion in current expenditure and €1.1 billion or almost 12% in capital expenditure.

Further to this a provision of up to €7 billion has been made for temporary spending measures to address the impacts of Covid-19 next year. In addition, funding for eligible measures as part of Ireland's €1.1 billion allocation under the Brexit Adjustment Reserve is available to be allocated across Budget 2022 and Budget 2023.

The fiscal strategy set out in the SES will ensure that we reduce the deficit in an orderly manner to the point that we are only borrowing for capital investment purposes by 2023. Achieving this target is essential both to support society and the economy to recover from the impact of Covid-19 and to return our public finances to a sustainable position. Such sustainability in our public finances will ensure that we are in a position to address key priorities for our people in housing, health, education and climate action, while also placing us in a position to respond to future challenges.

*Question No. 33 answered with Question No. 6.*

### **Flood Risk Management**

34. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform when the flood relief scheme in Skibbereen, County Cork will be officially completed. [45592/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The Skibbereen Flood Relief Scheme main construction contract was substantially completed on 6th June 2019. All identified defects arising from the construction have been remedied, albeit with some delays as a result of Covid-19.

Planning for the operation and maintenance of the scheme is ongoing, in conjunction with Cork County Council, who are acting as agents of the OPW in carrying out the statutory operation and maintenance of the scheme. A small number of works to address certain issues identified during construction, which were outside the main construction contract and mostly separate from the Scheme area, remain to be completed and are being progressed in separate work-packages, including the following works at the Cork Road and Rossa Road.

Drainage works planned on Cork Road are not part of the main Scheme, but were subsequently identified as being necessary. Detailed assessments are currently being progressed by Cork County Council and consultants RPS, in conjunction with Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), who are providing funding, and the OPW (who are providing some co-funding under the Minor Works & Flood Mitigation Scheme), to identify the most effective solution. The preliminary design report for these works is expected imminently. While work is currently ongoing on the development of a solution, the Council is not yet in a position to confirm the programme times in relation to planning approvals and construction.

Following the flood event which occurred in August 2020 in the Rossa Road area, Cork County Council and its consultants have been undertaking assessments of the problem. Although some assessments have yet to be finalised, some discussions have taken place with a local landowner, with a view to completing some remedial/improvement works. Further works will be progressed once the required reports are completed, and these are understood to be imminent. The OPW is providing funding towards these works under the Minor Works & Flood Mitigation Scheme.

### **Flood Risk Management**

35. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the current position in relation to the flood alleviation scheme for Crossmolina, County Mayo; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45421/21]

47. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of a scheme (details supplied); when it is likely to proceed to approval; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45639/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 35 and 47 together.

The Office of Public Works (OPW) submitted the Crossmolina Flood Relief Scheme documentation to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform for Statutory Confirmation under the Arterial Drainage Acts 1945 and 1995 on 28th September 2020.

As part of the Confirmation process, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER), appointed independent consultants to carry out a review of the scheme documentation. Following this review, supplementary information was requested by DPER in May 2021 and provided by the OPW in July 2021. The Department Of Public Expenditure and Reform has advised that it has received final technical reports from their environmental consultants on the proposed flood relief scheme, following clarifications sought from the OPW on further information recently provided in relation to the proposed works.

The Department is now finalising its review and a decision by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform is imminent.

## **EU Programmes**

36. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will report on the PEACE PLUS cross-Border EU programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45423/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I am pleased to report that the development of the new PEACE PLUS North South EU programme is now at a very advanced stage.

This new cross-border programme for Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland was first proposed by the European Commission in 2018. The proposal reflects the ongoing commitment of the European Union, and of the Irish Government and the UK Government, to the support of peace and prosperity in this region. PEACE PLUS will succeed the current INTERREG and PEACE cross-border EU programmes by combining these funding strands into one cohesive new programme for the 2021-27 period, with an anticipated total budget of over €1 billion.

The development of PEACE PLUS has been led by the cross-border Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), working closely with officials of my Department and of the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland. The SEUPB has been assisted by a cross-sectoral Programme Development Steering Group (PDSG), consisting of representatives of central and local government, environmental, rural, voluntary, community, equality, business and trade union groups from both Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The programme development process has been informed by extensive stakeholder engagement. This included an initial public consultation exercise in 2019/2020, involving public events held across the eligible area for PEACE PLUS, and a consultation on the draft programme in 2021, which elicited over three hundred written submissions. Government departments North and South have also engaged throughout the programme development period in order to identify and develop areas of cross-border collaboration.

On foot of this development process, the SEUPB has now finalised an ambitious draft PEACE PLUS programme based on a budget of over €1 billion and focused on six thematic areas. I encourage anyone with an interest in the new programme to visit [www.seupb.eu/peace-plus](http://www.seupb.eu/peace-plus) to learn more.

I am looking forward to bringing the draft PEACE PLUS programme to Government for approval in the coming weeks. Following approval by the Government and the Northern Ireland Executive, the draft programme will be submitted to the European Commission for its consideration and approval. It is anticipated that the programme will be launched in 2022, with the first funding approvals under PEACE PLUS taking place later that year.

## Legislative Measures

37. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the reason for his decision to propose a full new review of ethics legislation rather than restore the existing Public Sector Standards Bill 2015 to the order paper of Dáil Éireann; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45496/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Since it was established in 2011, my Department has committed significant resources in terms of policy development and consultation across government to explore how the statutory framework for ethics can be reformed to make it fit-for-purpose. An initial concrete outcome of this work was the Public Sector Standards Bill (the PSSB), which was brought forward by my predecessor in 2015. The broad aims of this draft legislation were to:

- Modernise, simplify and streamline the existing legislative framework;
- Respond to the recommendations on conflicts of interest contained in the final report of the Mahon and Moriarty Tribunals; and
- Consolidate local and national ethics requirements.

The PSSB commenced Second Stage of the legislative process in January 2016 and Committee Stage commenced in April 2017. However, as the Bill's passage had not been completed when the Dáil was dissolved in advance of the 2020 General Election it lapsed (as with all Bills). The Programme for Government of the Government formed after the election contains a commitment to "reform and consolidate the Ethics in Public Office legislation".

I recently brought proposals to Government for a review of the statutory framework for ethics in public life, as the first step in delivering on our commitment in the Programme for Government.

The review will enable us to take account of developments and issues that have arisen in public debate since the PSSB was last discussed in the Dáil in April 2017. The recommendations of the Review of Structures and Strategies to Prevent, Investigate and Penalise Economic Crime and Corruption (the 'Hamilton Report'), published in December 2020, also fall to be considered in the context of a reform of the statutory framework.

The review will consider:

- Ireland's existing ethics legislative framework,
- The recommendations of relevant tribunals of inquiry,
- Recommendations made by SIPO based on its operation of the current regime,
- The views of key stakeholders;
- Current EU/international best practice; and
- The views submitted during a public consultation.

The outcome of this review, which the Government has agreed to, will inform proposals for legislative reform that I intend to bring forward in 2022. These will have the ultimate goal of an easy to understand and user-friendly ethical framework that contributes to the quality and effectiveness of our public administration.

*Question No. 38 answered with Question No. 25.*

## **Budget 2022**

39. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will make the funds available in Budget 2022 to bring funding for education up to the OECD average of 4.9% of GDP; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45646/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As outlined in Figure 2.1 on page 13 of the 2021 Mid-Year Expenditure Report, growth in the economy as measured by modified gross national income (GNI\*) is broadly in line with growth in tax revenue and voted expenditure over the period 1999 to 2019, with growth in GDP diverging significantly in recent years, with in particular nominal growth in GDP of 35% between 2014 and 2015. These large increases in GDP have seen General Government expenditure as a percentage of GDP decreasing from 37.5% in 2014 to 24.5% in 2019, at a time when we have seen steady increases in expenditure.

Consequently, GNI\* is a more appropriate measure when looking at overall expenditure as a percentage of national income both in aggregate terms and for specific sectors. In this context, when cross country comparisons of expenditure as a percentage of national income are made, with GDP used as the national income base, such as in the OECD Report on Education, Ireland's level of expenditure appears low.

The Report published by the OECD last week, looks at indicators for inputs as well as outputs and outcomes relating to Education across OECD countries. In relation to inputs into education the report showed Ireland as having the lowest level of expenditure as a share of GDP compared to all other OECD countries. However, when expenditure on education is calculated over GNI\*, which as outlined above is more appropriate in the Irish context, expenditure on primary, secondary, further and higher education in Ireland as a share of GNI\* in 2018 was 5 percent. This is above the OECD average cited in the report.

Allocating and managing expenditure is not just concerned with inputs but also with the outputs and outcomes being delivered. Across a range of indicators looking at the outputs and outcomes of education, Ireland performs well in comparison to other OECD countries. For example, Irish students score amongst the highest in standardized reading tests (PISA) compared to other OECD countries, and Ireland has one of the highest shares of adults with tertiary education in the OECD.

The budgetary reforms introduced in recent years including Performance Budgeting and Equality Budgeting are focussed on providing the evidence base to support the efficient and effective delivery of services that have a positive impact on people's lives. This work is being further enhanced with the development of the Wellbeing Framework for Ireland that can inform efforts to improve the impact of public policy. This focus on performance and impact of expenditure is an essential element of the expenditure framework as we plan for steady sustainable increases in expenditure over the coming years.

## **Heritage Sites**

40. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will provide space for a play area in Dun Chaoin on the site of Ionad an Bhlascaoid; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45697/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The OPW's involvement with An Blascaod Mór goes back to 1988 with Ionad an Bhlascaoid, (the Blasket Centre) being developed with assistance from the locally based voluntary group, Fondúireacht an Bhlascaoid in 1992/3. The Centre was officially opened to public in April 1994 and the centre plays a critical role in the cultural life of Dún Chaoin and is an important facility for the local community. It is also an important heritage visitor experience, operated by OPW, which celebrates and interprets the extraordinary literary legacy of the Great Blasket and as such, it makes a significant contribution to the economic and tourism agenda in West Kerry.

At An Blascaod Mór itself, the State purchased the majority of the land holdings in 2009. The OPW has provided a very successful guide service on the island since 2013, highlighting the heritage of the island for visitors. The OPW, with assistance from Fáilte Ireland, has also restored two houses on the island, including the home of the pre-eminent Blasket author, Tomás Ó Criomhthain. Further work is currently underway with a view to the further conservation of the largely abandoned island village.

In 2020, the OPW opened a striking new 'Viewing Platform' at the Ionad site in Dún Chaoin, on a clifftop site overlooking the Blasket Sound. This project was funded by Fáilte Ireland and the OPW to create a unique way for visitors to experience the dramatic landscape of West Kerry. It connects with the headland walking routes which provide a safe way for visitors of all ages to enjoy the natural landscape.

As part of this strategic programme of investment with Fáilte Ireland, a project is also underway to refurbish Ionad an Bhlascaoid itself incorporating a completely reimagined interpretive exhibition of world-class standard. This project will be completed in Spring 2022 and will open to visitors for the Summer season next year.

Since the inception of Ionad an Bhlascaoid at Dún Chaoin, the OPW has been highly engaged with the local community and Fondúireacht an Bhlascaoid in seeking to meet the cultural and social needs of the community. In particular the OPW manifestly supports and nurtures the living language and the cultivation of a local community where Irish is the spoken language for all day-to-day activities.

Late last year, the OPW was approached by Comharchumann Dhún Chaoin regarding the possibility of the OPW providing land at the site of Ionad an Bhlascaoid for the purposes of a playground.

This proposal was given deep consideration by the OPW but there were a number of concerns in relation to establishing an enclosed, surfaced play area within the natural landscape located in a Special Area of Conservation. The OPW was also concerned about additional demand generated by users of the playground for facilities on site including toilets, café and car parking which have not been designed or planned with such demand in mind.

I have personal associations with Dún Chaoin and Corca Dhuibhne for many years and I am anxious to resolve this matter to the benefit of the OPW and the community in Dún Chaoin. I have asked my officials to examine all possibilities at the site in question to see if there might be scope for an alternative approach and I am very confident we will find a solution. There is a constructive dialogue ongoing and I believe an excellent outcome can be achieved which will meet the needs of the local community but will also be compatible with the operations of Ionad an Bhlascaoid.

I, together with senior OPW officials, plan to meet representatives of Comharchumann Dhún Chaoin shortly. I am hopeful that this engagement will enable further progress to be made to

bring this matter to a satisfactory conclusion.

## Education Policy

41. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his views on the latest publication by the OECD which places Ireland at the bottom of a list of 36 OECD countries in terms of the amount of GDP being invested in education; his plans for improving this record; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45603/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The recent OECD Education at a Glance report examines indicators across OECD countries for inputs as well as outputs and outcomes relating to Education.

As one of the inputs to education, the report compares spend on education across countries as a percentage of their GDP and shows Ireland's 2018 spending at 3.3% of GDP, below the OECD average of 4.9%. For Ireland however, comparing public spending against GNI\* gives a better indication of the resources allocated as it adjusts for the impact of globalisation activities that disproportionately affect Irish economic aggregates. When expenditure on education is measured against GNI\* expenditure on primary, secondary, further and higher education in Ireland in 2018 and 2019 was 5 percent, just above the OECD average.

This investment in our education system can be seen in Ireland's strong performance across a range of indicators covered in the report looking at educational outputs and outcomes. Among the areas where Ireland is performing well compared to the other OECD countries are Irish students scoring amongst the highest in standardized reading tests (PISA) compared to other OECD countries and one of the highest shares of adults with tertiary education in the OECD.

This year, around €12 billion has been allocated to the Departments of Education and of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Skills for core expenditure, almost 16% of all core voted spending.

## Capital Expenditure Programme

42. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will report on capital expenditure to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45493/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As the Deputy will be aware, the drawdown of capital expenditure from the Exchequer is detailed each month and is publicly available in the Fiscal Monitor, which is published on the gov.ie website. All line Departments and agencies submit information on their expenditure levels against profile to my Department, along with an explanation outlining details regarding any variance of under or over spending against profile.

The latest capital expenditure figures available to end-August show that the net capital spend, including capital carryover, was €4,153 million. When the carryover amount is omitted, the net capital spend amounts to €3,726 million, which is 14.8% or €649 million behind the profiled amount of €4,375 million, with all but one Department declaring underspends against profile.

2021 saw a larger than usual capital carryover from the previous year with €710 million carried over. The carryover spend to end-August amounts to €427 million (60.2% of the €710

million carryover).

Capital expenditure by its nature tends to be lumpy, with a particularly high drawdown at year-end. For example, 25.6% of the annual capital issues were drawn down in December 2018; 25.4% in December 2019 and 32.4% in December 2020. It is therefore difficult to predict, at this point in time, the levels of savings, if any, at end-year.

While there was an impact on building activity earlier this year, due to Covid restrictions, activity in the sector has ramped up significantly since sites re-opened when restrictions were lifted in April. With this increased activity, Departments generally expect spending to realign with profiled expenditure by the end of the year.

We will continue to monitor and report on capital expenditure developments as the year progresses.

### **Economic Growth**

43. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if in the context of economic progress over the next year, he expects to invoke any further reforms to address any likely issues that might arise; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45599/21]

78. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which it is expected to meet the challenges of the reopening of the economy while at the same time maintaining prudent spending; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45598/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 43 and 78 together.

The prudent management of the public finances in recent years provided Government with the scope to provide substantial supports in order to respond to Covid-19 and to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. Indeed, across 2020 and 2021, Government will have made available over €31 billion for direct expenditure measures to support our people, businesses and key public services deal with the impacts of Covid-19.

Looking forward, the pandemic has now entered a new phase and the reopening of our economy continues to take place. In light of this, we must adapt our budgetary policy. The Summer Economic Statement set out a pathway to meet core objectives of Government of continuing to invest in our economy and society, while also reducing the deficit in order to underpin the sustainability of the public finances.

It would not be appropriate to withdraw all pandemic related spending in the one year. Accordingly, up to €7 billion has been set aside for non-recurring Covid-19 related supports in 2022. In tandem with this, the fiscal strategy in the SES sets out sustainable annual increases in core public expenditure in the upcoming and subsequent budgets, thus ensuring prudent levels of core voted spending are maintained over the medium term.

Underpinning this strategy is the Programme for Government commitment to continue to reform and improve the Budgetary process in order to enhance Ireland's budgetary framework. The budgetary reforms introduced in recent years, including Performance Budgeting and Equality Budgeting, are focussed on providing the evidence base to support the efficient and effective delivery of services that have a positive impact on people's lives. This work is being further

enhanced with the development of the Wellbeing Framework for Ireland that can inform efforts to improve the impact of public policy. This focus on performance and impact of expenditure is an essential element of the expenditure framework as we plan for steady sustainable increases in expenditure over the coming years.

### **Court Accommodation**

44. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of plans to carry out remedial works to the railings at Carlow courthouse being managed by the Office of Public Works on behalf of the Courts Service; if there is an update to tender documentation for the repair of ten sections of the railings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45071/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The Office of Public Works Heritage Services Division has recently received a number of tenders for the repair of the railings at Carlow Courthouse. On September 16th 2021 the Conservation Procurement Unit issued both the letter of intent and results letters. A standstill period of 14 days came into effect from Friday 17th of September. The Commissioners of Public Works would hope to be in a position to issue the letter of award on or shortly after the 4nd October 2021 for the completion of remedial works to the specified sections of the Carlow Courthouse railings.

### **Public Procurement Contracts**

45. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he plans to change public sector procurement to make the process more accessible to small suppliers and contractors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45654/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Public Procurement is governed by EU legislation and National rules and guidelines to ensure compliance with the principles of transparency, non-discrimination and equal treatment which are key to demonstrating the State's attainment of maximum value for money through competitive procedures. To create a level playing field for all businesses across the Single European Market, EU law sets out minimum harmonised procurement rules for all Member States.

The Government recognises the importance of the SME sector and continues to enhance the already substantial measures to support SMEs in accessing the public procurement market. The Office of Government Procurement (OGP), an office within my Department, has developed a suite of policy measures aimed at assisting SMEs to access public procurement opportunities (implemented through Circular 10/2014). These include:

- Proportionate financial capacity;
- Division of public contracts into lots;
- Provision for "consortia bidding" to assist SMEs where they would not have the relevant capability or scale;
- Proportionate insurance levels; and
- All contracts for goods and services valued above €25,000 must be advertised on eTenders.

This ensures that as many businesses and SMEs are aware of tendering opportunities as possible. The latest analysis carried out by the OGP indicates that 53% of the €4.8 billion procurement addressable expenditure analysed is with the SME sector.

The Programme for Government sets out a number of commitments including training for Irish indigenous SMEs so that they can compete for public procurement contracts in Ireland and abroad. The OGP will support the work of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment in this regard.

My colleague, Minister of State, Ossian Smyth TD, who has responsibility for public procurement, chairs quarterly meetings of the SME Advisory Group with industry representative bodies Irish SME Association (ISME), Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC), Small Firms Association (SFA), Chambers Ireland, and Construction Industry Federation (CIF). The Tender Advisory Service, which was re-launched in 2018 following consultation with the SME Advisory Group, is available to assist SMEs with public procurement issues.

My Department will continue to proactively engage with business to enhance the significant measures and strategies already in place to support SME access to public procurement opportunities building on the progress to date.

### **Freedom of Information**

46. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to review freedom of information legislation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45687/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I would like to thank the Deputy for the question and am glad to have this opportunity to provide to this House further details on the upcoming review of the Freedom of Information Act.

My Department will in the coming weeks publish a roadmap document that will set out in detail the process for the review and give detailed information on how interested stakeholders can get involved.

My firm belief is that we should be seeking to promote a collaborative approach not only to the review process, but also to “doing transparency” more broadly. We should recognise that all stakeholders, from the public sector to the media, academia, activists and interest groups, as well as individual requesters, have a role to play in delivering effective and meaningful state transparency for the Irish public, and must work together to achieve that goal.

The remit and outcomes of the review will be driven by evidence. The review will accordingly seek inputs from the broadest possible range of stakeholders throughout the process. It is planned that public consultation will take place later this year, which will largely determine the scope of the review. I would urge all interested parties to take this opportunity to make their voices heard and to define the issues that will be considered in the review.

Following the scoping consultation, my Department will prepare and publish a document setting out the issues that have been identified. This document will be published and a further consultation will take place early in the new year that will allow stakeholders the opportunity to make detailed submissions based on the themes that have been identified. These submissions will be central to the outcome of the review.

Alongside the public consultation process, my Department will undertake focused and tar-

geted information gathering, driven by any knowledge gaps identified as the review progresses.

Two particular projects have already been identified as necessary and will commence later in the year. Firstly, a customer satisfaction survey will be undertaken to assess the attitudes of requesters and staff members of public bodies towards the FOI process. Secondly, a project that aims to assess the cost of FOI, so that we can have a clear picture of the resourcing demands that are required to operate the system as it currently stands.

In addition, the review will consider international good practice and developments and seek to take account of the transformation in the manner in which people interact with information since the 2014 Act came into force.

Finally, as a key sectoral stakeholder with a unique and unrivalled understanding of the operation of the Freedom of Information Act, my Department will consult with the Office of the Information Commissioner on an ongoing basis as the review progresses.

By the middle of next year, my Department will be in a position to prepare a report for publication setting out the findings and recommendations of the review.

*Question No. 47 answered with Question No. 35.*

*Question No. 48 answered with Question No. 6.*

## **Flood Risk Management**

49. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the CFRAM programme specifically in relation to schemes in County Louth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45568/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** Through the Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management (CFRAM) Programme, detailed engineering analysis, assessment and extensive public consultation was undertaken for 300 communities throughout Ireland, including 90 coastal areas, which in 2012 were identified as being most likely to be impacted by future coastal and fluvial flooding.

One key output of the CFRAM Programme were the Flood Risk Management Plans (FRMP's) that contain proposed flood relief measures - informed by costs, benefits and environmental factors - to address the flood risk in each community and nationwide.

The evidence provided by the CFRAM Programme, launched in May 2018, supports the Government's €1bn planned investment in flood relief through the National Development Plan 2018-2027 as part of Project Ireland 2040.

As part of this, Louth County Council, working with the Office of Public Works, has agreed to be the Lead Authority in the delivery of flood relief schemes at Dundalk / Blackrock South, Drogheda, Carlingford / Greenore, Baltray and Ardee, all of which are in the first tranche of projects being progressed.

- The proposed flood relief scheme at Dundalk / Blackrock South includes the Ardee Flood Relief Scheme and will protect some 1,880 properties when completed.

- The proposed flood relief scheme at Drogheda and Baltray will protect some 450 properties when completed.

- The proposed flood relief scheme at Carlingford and Greenore will protect some 409 properties when completed.

While the CFRAM process investigated possible structural flood relief measures for both Annagassan and Termonfeckin, economically viable schemes for these communities were not identified, and so a review of the risk in these communities and the likely costs and benefits is to be undertaken. The Office of Public Works has put in place a process for undertaking such reviews, and it is envisaged that these reviews, including those for Annagassan and Termonfeckin, will be complete within the next 12 months.

The tender for Engineering Consultancy Services was awarded in 2020 to Binnies (formerly Black and Veatch) and Nicholas O 'Dwyer (Joint Venture) for the Dundalk/Blackrock South and Ardee projects that are being progressed simultaneously.

The tender for Engineering Consultancy Services has recently been awarded to RPS Consulting Engineers Ltd for the Drogheda and Baltray projects that are also being progressed simultaneously.

The Engineering Consultancy Services tender brief for the Carlingford and Greenore scheme is currently being developed and is due to be published in the coming months.

Once consultants are appointed to progress each scheme, consultation with statutory and non-statutory bodies, as well as the general public, will take place at the appropriate stages to ensure that all parties have the opportunity to input into the development of the proposals within the Scheme.

### **Flood Risk Management**

50. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the expected timeframe for completion of an overflow pipe at Lough Funshinagh. [44887/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The works at Lough Funshinagh were initiated by Roscommon County Council. In response to the Deputy's question, I have asked Roscommon County Council to contact you directly.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

51. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the steps he is taking to achieve the 20% target for remote working across the public service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45398/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** You will be aware that the Government has committed in the Programme for Government to mandating public sector employers to move to 20% home and remote working.

In July, 2021, the Government approved a Policy Statement on Blended Working in the Civil Service, which was produced by my Department and agreed by the Civil Service Management Board. The Policy Statement commits the Civil Service to implementing a policy of blended working for the future that can provide flexibility to both employees and their employers in a manner that supports the continued delivery of high quality services to Government, the public and business while providing employees, where appropriate, with choice and opportunity.

Remote working in the Civil Service, post pandemic, will be facilitated on a blended basis. In this context, Officials in my Department have also been working with, and continue to work with employers across the Civil and Public Service to develop a Blended Working Policy Framework for the Civil Service with the aim of achieving the 20% target.

This Framework focuses on the longer-term approach to remote working in the sector and can assist in providing a consistent approach across the wider public sector. The Framework will be finalised over the coming months, following engagement with employee representatives. When this engagement has concluded and the Framework is agreed, it will be rolled out to all civil service organisations. The Framework will provide consistency on certain issues and inform the development of organisational blended working policies which will be tailored to meet the specific requirements of each Department/Office.

### **School Staff**

52. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his Department has provided for the recent pay agreement with school secretaries and caretakers in Budget 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45716/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Policy in relation to school secretaries and caretakers is a matter for the Minister for Education. The Deputy alluded to a pay agreement in his question, however, I understand that the parties remain in discussions at the WRC at this time.

*Question No. 53 answered with Question No. 15.*

*Question No. 54 answered with Question No. 12.*

### **Flood Risk Management**

55. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the planned expenditure on flood relief in Cork city over the next ten years. [45594/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The Government has allowed for €1 billion of capital investment in Flood Risk Management over the period 2018 to 2027 as part of the National Development Plan. This allocation is to allow the OPW, in collaboration with Local Authority Delivery Partners, to continue implementation of its comprehensive programme of investment in flood relief schemes nationally. This programme currently includes over 150 projects, with eight currently at construction and a further 38 at various stages of design. The Government and I are committed to implementing the remaining projects within the timeframe of the National Development Plan, a number of which have already commenced and all of which are scheduled to be complete or underway in the lifetime of the NDP. In addition to these projects, the OPW will continue to fund Local Authorities to undertake local flood mitigation projects under the Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Scheme.

The Office of Public Works has planned significant expenditure for flood relief works in Cork City as part of the NDP. The projects included in this expenditure profile include the main Lower Lee (Cork City) Flood Relief Scheme, as well as schemes for Blackpool, Glashaboy and Douglas/Togher, and co-funding flood defence works in Morrison's Island.

### **Lower Lee and Morrison's Island**

The Lower Lee (Cork City) Flood Relief Scheme has an estimated cost of approximately €140m, including contributions to the estimated cost of approximately €12m for the Morrison's Island scheme, which is a Cork City Council-led public realm scheme with flood defence elements part-funded by OPW.

The Lower Lee Flood Relief Scheme is currently at Detailed Design stage and it is intended to submit the Scheme for Confirmation to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform in early 2022. While the project budget of the Lower Lee Flood Relief Scheme at Public Exhibition stage was €140m, significant enhancements to the proposed scheme design, resulting from engagement and submissions at Public Exhibition stage, will require this figure to be revised before the submission for Confirmation. Once the Scheme is confirmed by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform under the Arterial Drainage Acts 1945 and 1995, and following the appointment of Contractors, the Scheme will have an anticipated construction period of 5-6 years.

Although the Morrison's Island project is primarily a public realm project, which is being advanced by Cork City Council, it will also include the integration of flood defences in the area, and elements of its design are therefore being coordinated with the design of the Lower Lee Flood Relief Scheme, and co-funded by the Office of Public Works. An Bord Pleanála granted approval for the Morrison's Island Public Realm and Flood Defence Project in June 2020. However, in August 2020, the Save Cork City (SCC) Community Association Ltd. applied for, and was granted, leave to take a Judicial Review of An Bord Pleanála's decision to approve the project. The Judicial Review hearing took place in July 2021 and the High Court upheld the Decision of An Bord Pleanála to grant the planning permission for the proposed development, and refused a stay on the undertaking of any works pursuant to the grant of the planning permission for the proposed development. Accordingly, tender documentation for the procurement of a civil works contractor is to be finalised and issued later in 2021.

### **Blackpool**

The Blackpool flood relief scheme has an estimated cost of €20.5m. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform confirmed the Blackpool Flood Relief Scheme in March 2021 and construction was expected to commence in 2022. However, due to ongoing Judicial Review proceedings, expenditure on the Scheme will be significantly reduced in 2022 and, subject to the outcome of Judicial Review proceedings, construction may not commence until 2023 at the earliest, which in turn may delay the substantial completion target date of 2025.

### **Douglas**

The Douglas flood relief scheme (including Togher culvert) is being progressed by Cork County Council and Cork City Council (following boundary extension). In November 2017, planning approval was given by An Bord Pleanála for the Douglas (including Togher culvert) scheme. The scheme is being delivered in three Phases. Construction of the scheme commenced in 2019, with the first two phases now substantially complete. The construction contract was awarded for the final phase, Phase 3 - Togher Main works in summer 2021 with the scheme now at construction. The total project budget for the scheme is €28m, which will protect 231 properties. The current expenditure on the scheme is €12.9m.

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

### **Glashaboy**

The Glashaboy River Flood Relief Scheme at Glanmire / Sallybrook, Cork is being progressed by Cork City Council. This scheme was confirmed on 18th January 2021 by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. The twelve-week period for judicial review expired on 12th April 2021 without receipt of any objections. The procurement to appoint the civil works contractor for this scheme is being progressed. I am advised by Cork City Council, as the contracting authority for this flood relief scheme, that it expects to invite tenders for this civil work contract within the coming weeks. The scheme will provide protection to 103 properties with an estimated total project of €13.9m. The current expenditure on the scheme is €2.7m.

The flood relief scheme is being funded from the Government's €1 billion investment for flood risk management over the period of the National Development Plan 2018-2027, as part of Project Ireland 2040. Provision for the cost of the Scheme is included in the Office of Public Works' multi-annual capital allocation.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

56. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the details of the work underway to introduce blended working into the Civil Service in a way that provides flexibility for workers whilst maintaining customer service levels; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45402/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** You will be aware that the Government has committed in the Programme for Government to mandating public sector employers to move to 20% home and remote working.

In July, 2021 the Government approved a Policy Statement on Blended Working in the Civil Service, which was produced by my Department and agreed by the Civil Service Management Board. The Policy Statement commits the Civil Service to implementing a policy of blended working for the future that can provide flexibility to both employees and their employers in a manner that supports the continued delivery of high quality services to Government, the public and business while providing employees, where appropriate, with choice and opportunity.

Remote working in the Civil Service, post pandemic, will be facilitated on a blended basis. In this context, Officials in my Department have been working with, and continue to work with employers across the Civil and Public Service to develop a Blended Working Policy Framework for the Civil Service. This Framework focuses on the longer-term approach to remote working in the sector and can assist in providing a consistent approach across the wider public sector. The primary Principle set out in the Framework is that blended working must support the business needs of the Organisation. Blended working presents an opportunity to meet business needs in a new way of working; to enhance service delivery; underpin business continuity; and improve the performance of organisations, provided the role being performed is suitable to be carried out remotely.

The Framework will be finalised over the coming months, following engagement with employee representatives. When this engagement has concluded and the Framework is agreed, it will be rolled out to all civil service organisations. The Framework will provide consistency on certain issues and inform the development of organisational blended working policies which will be tailored to meet the specific requirements of each Department/Office.

### **Public Appointments Service**

57. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if will review the efficacy of the Public Appointment Services in view of both the protracted appointment of the Shannon Group chairperson which has taken 13 months to date coupled with another fact (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45426/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Following a Government decision in 2014 in relation to reforms to the State Boards appointments process, appointments have been advertised openly on the State Boards portal [www.stateboards.ie](http://www.stateboards.ie), which is operated by the Public Appointments Service (PAS).

Appointments should meet specific and detailed criteria which are determined by the relevant Minister as necessary for the effective performance of the relevant role. Appointments should also be processed by way of a transparent assessment system, designed and implemented by PAS, to support the relevant Minister in making appointments to State Boards under their remit.

I believe that the PAS has played an important role in achieving greater openness in the appointments process to State Boards in recent years, and delivering increased transparency regarding the selection process. I understand that PAS has also been successful in developing a diverse and highly experienced pool of people who are willing to contribute to the assessment process as members of Assessment Panels.

While it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the details of a recruitment process which has been undertaken by PAS on behalf of another Minister, my official undertake regular governance and budgetary meetings with PAS, and I have asked them to follow up on this issue, and whether there are any lessons that can be applied into the future. More generally, I understand that since 2014 PAS has provided Ministers with names of 3,784 high calibre candidates who are suitable for appointment to State Boards.

### **Departmental Expenditure**

58. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the cumulative additional spending his Department has sanctioned as a consequence of the pandemic since March 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45488/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Responding to the impacts of Covid-19 has been a key priority for Government with significant supports put in place to respond to the pandemic. Across 2020 and 2021, Government will have made available over €31 billion for direct expenditure measures to support our people, businesses and key public services deal with the impacts of Covid-19.

Over €16½ billion was allocated during 2020 to Departments in response to Covid-19 following the onset of the pandemic.

For 2021, spending on Covid-19 related measures is currently expected to cost almost €15 billion. As outlined in the Mid-Year Expenditure Report, €10.7 billion of this amount has been allocated to Departments in Estimates voted by Dáil Éireann, with approximately €4 billion to be allocated including for measures announced in June under the Economic Recovery Plan.

Budget 2021 had set aside €12 billion for Covid-19 measures, with €6½ billion of this allocated to Departments and €5.4 billion initially set aside in reserve to allow Government respond to the evolving situation with the virus during the year. The increase in expenditure relative to the amount set aside in October last year is driven primarily by the higher than anticipated

expenditure on the Covid-19 related income and employment support schemes following the resurgence of the virus in late 2020 and the decisions to extend the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme and the Pandemic Unemployment Payment beyond the end of March. As set out in the Mid-Year Expenditure Report, it is now estimated that the cost of Covid-19 related supports provided through the Department of Social Protection will be c. €10 billion this year.

As set out in the Summer Economic Statement, inclusive of an amount of c. €0.2 billion in spending under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, €7 billion is being made available for Covid-19 related expenditure, including a contingency fund, which will allow essential public health measures to continue in key areas next year and for a phased withdrawal of supports.

*Question No. 59 answered with Question No. 15.*

### **Departmental Expenditure**

60. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the estimated overall level of Covid-19 related public expenditure that he anticipates in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45492/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The expenditure strategy for 2022 set out in July's Summer Economic Statement provided for up to €8.1 billion in non-core, temporary spending under the overall expenditure ceiling. This provides €7 billion for Covid-19 related public expenditure measures during 2022, including approximately €0.2 billion expected to be spent under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. In addition, the €1.1 billion available under the Brexit Adjustment Reserve has been included under 2022 spending on a technical basis and will likely be allocated across Budget 2022 and Budget 2023.

Of this €7 billion funding provision for Covid-19 related measures, €1.5 billion has been indicated for automatic stabilisers, primarily job-seekers payments, while €2.5 billion will be available to meet pressures that may remain in delivering public services in line with any continued public health requirements. Decisions on specific measures to be covered by this funding will be made as part of the Estimates process and, as in 2021, allocations to Departments for Covid-19 measures will be separately identified in the Expenditure Report. These amounts had been included in the Stability Programme Update published in April.

Given the continued uncertainty in relation to the virus and the requirement to ensure that supports are carefully withdrawn in a manner that supports recovery in the economy, the Summer Economic Statement included an additional €2.8 billion in funding that can be utilised to support a phased withdrawal of supports and also to make provision for a contingency reserve. This contingency reserve will allow Government flexibility to respond as the situation with the virus evolves.

### **Heritage Projects**

61. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the proposed conservation management plan for the historic Oldbridge House and estate which is operated by the OPW; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45494/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** Oldbridge Estate is situated on 500 acres in Co. Meath taking in much of

the original historic battlefield of the Battle of the Boyne. It was acquired by the Irish State for the purpose of conserving and presenting the location of this pivotal event in Irish history, for current and future generations. The site is of deep historical and political significance to many communities on the island of Ireland and a significant population of visitors from communities in Northern Ireland visit the site each year. Oldbridge House provides an interpretative centre, which welcomes over 30,000 annual visitors to the exhibition featuring authentic 17th century armaments and accompanying audio-visual presentations.

In addition to the interpretive centre, the extensive gardens have been restored and feature an unusual sunken octagonal garden, a peach house, an orchard and herbaceous borders, while a tearoom pavilion has also been added.

The parklands attract 400,000 visitors per year, far in excess of the 100,000 projected when the site was originally refurbished and opened to the public in 2008. Many visitors to the site are attracted to the canal-side and river walks, the extensive parklands, and the Walled Gardens - which are free of charge to access.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, a further 20,000 came to the site to attend events run by OPW such as “living history” military re-enactments, performances by local arts groups, Harvest, Halloween and Christmas Festivals featuring local small food producers and enterprises from the Boyne region.

The OPW now intends to develop an updated Conservation Management Plan which responds to the demand and current usage of the site and in order to plan for how we can best develop and manage the estate in the future. Key issues for consideration include the existing parking provision and the associated challenges that come with over 400,000 visitors annually, as well as the conservation and potential use of the historically significant farmyard buildings and the refurbishment of the upper floors of the house.

The Conservation Management Plan will seek to strike a balance between meeting the needs of the ever-increasing numbers of visitors and sustainable tourism. It will set out how future development at Oldbridge Estate will ensure the conservation and protection of this unique historic site as well as supporting the site to continue to contribute to the tourism and economic agenda for Meath and south Louth. Oldbridge is also an important site for biodiversity with a variety of habitats including grasslands, waterways and woodlands and the plan will ensure it continues to support the Government’s objectives in respect of climate change mitigation and biodiversity conservation.

I can confirm that officials are engaged in a procurement process to contract consultants to develop this plan and that consultants will be appointed in the coming weeks.

## **Flood Risk Management**

62. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of flood defences in the Spanish Arch and docks area of Galway city; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45633/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O’Donovan):** I am advised that Flood defences in the Spanish Arch and docks area of Galway city are being developed as part of the Coirib go Cósta – Galway City Flood Relief Scheme.

Galway City Council, as Project Sponsor and Contracting Authority, is leading the develop-

ment of the Coirib go Cósta – Galway City Flood Relief Scheme for the city, with technical advice and funding being provided by the Office of Public Works. Following a tender process undertaken by the City Council, an engineering and environmental consultant was appointed in November 2020 to review and build on the initial proposals in the Flood Risk Management Plan, which were developed under the CFRAM Programme. The objective of the Coirib go Cósta Project is to assess, design and deliver a viable, cost-effective, and environmentally sustainable flood relief scheme for Galway city. The Coirib go Cósta - Galway City Flood Relief Scheme has a preliminary total project budget estimate of €9.5m and has the objective of protecting over 940 properties in the Long Walk, Spanish Arch, Eglinton Canal, Merchants Quay, Raven Terrace, Salthill and Claddagh areas of Galway City from tidal and river flooding.

The scheme has been broken into five distinct stages:

Stage 1 – Options assessment and scheme development. The options assessment and development stage is currently ongoing.

Stage 2 – Planning and Consent. This is when the preparation and submission of planning documentation to An Bord Pleanála will be undertaken, along with the completion of all required environmental assessments and consents.

Stage 3 – Detailed design and tender process. The detailed design of the preferred scheme will be completed in stage three, followed by the procurement of contractors for the construction of the scheme.

Stage 4 – Scheme construction. The construction stage of the scheme is estimated to take approximately two and a half years.

Stage 5 – Handover and completion. The handover and completion stage of the project (including defects period) marks the completion of the project and is estimated to be finalised in mid 2029.

The project is currently at Stage 1 where options development and initial scheme development takes place. Work to date on this stage has consisted of:

- Collection and review of available data relating to the scheme and study area. For example: historic flood data; CFRAM data; Irish Water data; and Galway City Council data.

- Additional data collection in the form of surveys. These surveys include: invasive species; threshold levels; a wave overtopping study; culverts and drainage; hydrometric gauges; and surveys of existing flood defences.

- The hydrological method statement is currently being finalised. This will form the basis for the hydrological design and hydraulic modelling required for the scheme.

- Significant work has also been undertaken on stakeholder and public engagement.

- A scheme-specific communications strategy has been developed to ensure best practice is implemented for stakeholder and public engagement throughout the project.

- The opening public engagement process has already been undertaken; beginning on 1st June and finishing on 7th July 2021. This event was widely advertised and was held online due to current Covid 19 restrictions.

- Engagement with significant stakeholders has commenced in addition to the public engagement day – these include the Galway Harbour Authority, Irish Water, and NUIG. Building on this, a first collaborative workshop has been scheduled for the 28th September 2021 that will

collectively meet with all stakeholders identified as having a high interest and high influence on the project.

Stakeholder engagement will continue throughout the project. The next non-statutory public engagement day will take place in Q3 2022 where a range of draft scheme options will be presented for consultation. Here, members of the public will have an opportunity to review all emerging options and provide feedback which will be addressed by the project team in moving towards developing the preferred scheme option.

A third non-statutory public engagement day is scheduled towards the end of Stage 1, prior to submission of the scheme for Planning, which will be used to present the emerging preferred scheme option. Again, a submissions period will be provided and members of the public will have an opportunity to put forward their opinions on the emerging preferred scheme prior to Planning. This feedback will be incorporated into developing the final scheme option.

Environmental assessments will be a very important element of this scheme in particular. Work towards the Environmental Impact Assessment and Appropriate Assessment will be undertaken by the consultants throughout the planning and design stages of the project and will also take into account information gathered during the consultation processes.

The environmental consultants will be responsible for the preparation of the Environmental Impact Assessment Report, Appropriate Assessment Screening Report and Natura Impact Statement (as required).

The Coirib go Cósta – Galway City Flood Relief Scheme is primarily focused on addressing the sustainable and effective management of flood risk but shall also ensure that the design of any measures, in particular structural measures, recognise the distinctive character of Galway city. The scheme will include creative landscape and architectural solutions, which, in addition to addressing flood risk management, will enhance the biodiversity, urban landscape and public realm amenity of the receiving environment, whilst integrating with other advancing projects.

This scheme represents a significant Investment Project for Galway City, which will be undertaken with all due consideration for regulatory, planning, environmental and social constraints, while achieving the goal of delivering a viable, cost-effective and environmentally sustainable flood relief scheme for Galway city.

The project has a website ([www.coiribgocosta.ie/](http://www.coiribgocosta.ie/)) that provides up to date information to those interested in the scheme's progress.

## **Budget Process**

63. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if the €5.3 million recently returned to the Exchequer from the Criminal Assets Bureau can be ring-fenced and reinvested back into the communities that have been mostly impacted by crime. [45399/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As the Deputy will be aware, earlier this month the Minister for Justice, Heather Humphreys TD, welcomed the Annual Report of the Criminal Assets Bureau for 2020. The report was submitted to the Minister by the Criminal Assets Bureau pursuant to the provisions of section 21 of the Criminal Assets Bureau Act, 1996 and brought to Government by Minister Humphreys. The Report, which has been published, outlines that the Criminal Assets Bureau returned €5.3 million to the public purse in 2020. Proceeds of crime actions, together with actions under the revenue and social protection provisions, yielded in excess of €4.2 million to the Exchequer. A further €1.1

million was returned to the Exchequer under section 24 of the Criminal Justice Act 1994, which allows for the confiscation of assets of a person who has been convicted of drug trafficking and where the court has determined that the offender has benefited from drug trafficking.

As I stated in my previous responses to similar Parliamentary Questions last year any proposal to ring fence funding allocations would contravene a general principle of public financial management that earmarking revenues for a specific expenditure programme would constrain the Government in the implementation of its overall expenditure policy.

Notwithstanding this position, the continued importance of community crime prevention initiatives and the need for the prioritisation of funding for such initiatives are matters on which both the Minister for Justice and I are agreed.

I am of the view that as a Government we need to clearly demonstrate to communities how success in detecting and combating crime can be linked in more transparent ways to support for youth diversion programmes while respecting the principles of public financial management. In recognition of this, earlier this year, the Minister of Justice and I jointly announced our agreement in principle to establish a new fund to support community safety in the context of Budget 2022. Provision for the new Community Safety Innovation Fund will be included in the Justice Vote as part of the Estimates process and will reflect the significant successes of An Garda Síochána and the Criminal Assets Bureau in disrupting criminal activity and seizing proceeds of crime.

The Community Safety Innovation Fund will support the work of new Community Safety Partnerships in every local authority area by providing prioritised funding to the best community safety proposals. It will also encourage the development of innovative ways in which to improve community safety from people within the community itself, as each Community Safety Partnership will bring together residents, community representatives, business interests, councillors, local authorities and State services such as An Garda Síochána, Tusla and the HSE to devise and implement Local Community Safety Plans. The Plans will outline how the community proposes to support crime prevention and will reflect community priorities and local safety issues. The goal is to make communities safer for families, residents and businesses.

### **Public Procurement Contracts**

64. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his views on whether the contracting authorities are conducting an appropriate level of due diligence in view of recent public procurement audit failures associated with Covid-19-related purchases; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45418/21]

70. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he is satisfied that contracting authorities are conducting an appropriate level of due diligence in view of recent public procurement audit failures associated with Covid-19 related purchases; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45602/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 64 and 70 together.

EU public procurement regulations were developed and agreed by all Member States within the European Union to promote an open, competitive and non-discriminatory public procurement regime which delivers best value for money. The regulations, however, acknowledge that there can be legitimate reasons for awarding contracts without the use of a competitive process, including extreme urgency brought about by unforeseeable events such as the onset of the

Covid-19 pandemic. The regulations provide for a range of options for procuring goods and services in such urgent circumstances.

In July, the Government agreed that, as the early challenges of the pandemic have now been addressed, the number of circumstances reduced where exceptional procurement action is required. The Government recognised, however, that the pandemic may yet bring additional unforeseen challenges which may require such exceptional action. However, such situations are expected to be rare and must be fully justified and reported to the Comptroller & Auditor General.

The Office of Government Procurement (OGP), an office within my Department, has responsibility for developing and setting out the overarching policy framework and associated guidelines to facilitate compliance with public procurement rules. The OGP will shortly publish an updated Information Note for public bodies on Covid-19 and public procurement emphasising the need for public bodies to attain maximum value for money through competitive procedures.

My Department, including the OGP, has no role in the audit and scrutiny of the procurement practices of public sector bodies. It is a matter for individual contracting authorities to ensure that their public procurement function is discharged in line with the standard accounting and procurement rules and procedures. Section 19 of the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act, 1993 provides that each Accounting Officer is personally responsible for the safeguarding of public funds and property under his or her control; for the regularity and propriety of all the transactions in each Appropriation Account bearing his or her signature; and for the efficiency and economy of administration in his or her Department. Public procurement practices are subject to audit and scrutiny under the Comptroller & Auditor General.

### **Public Procurement Contracts**

65. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the way he plans to promote green public procurement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45397/21]

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

- Clearly defined, quantifiable, verifiable, and measurable criteria have been developed by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC), and are relevant to the specific procurement process, and
- The cost can be met within a Department's existing budget, without impacting on service delivery

Circular 20/2019 also requires public bodies to incorporate relevant green procurement measures into their planning and reporting cycles as an appendix within each Annual Report which serves to further promote its uptake. Additionally, departments provide detailed reports to the Environmental Protection Agency annually which will assist in understanding where further guidance is needed or where promotion should focus.

In September 2021, my colleague Minister of State with responsibility for Public Procurement and eGovernment, Ossian Smyth launched the updated 'Green Public Procurement -

Guidance for the Public Sector'. The Office of Government Procurement (OGP) supported the EPA in the development of this guidance. It incorporates guidance for 10 priority categories on:

- Opportunities to consider green issues throughout the procurement process
- Defined, quantifiable, and measurable criteria and
- Methods of verification.

The EPA funded training for public procurement officers on the guidance throughout 2021 and will extend training to suppliers this year.

My Officials in the OGP will engage with the EPA and DECC in further promoting the use of the updated guidance through the inter-departmental Strategic Procurement Advisory Group (SPAG) and its Environmental subgroup. The SPAG facilitates incorporation of social and environmental considerations into public procurement bringing together officials from policy departments with public procurement practitioners to share best practice. The Environmental subgroup, chaired jointly by the OGP and DECC, facilitates detailed, technical discussion on approaches to incorporate environmental considerations into procurement. Also, OGP engages bilaterally with public bodies promoting GPP, and presents at many events aimed at the public sector, including the EPA Circular Economy Conference 2021.

My Department is committed to promoting GPP in line with international and national policy and best practice and continues to work effectively with partners to build upon the current interest in GPP arising from recent developments including the Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy, Climate Action (Amendment) Act, and Climate Action Plans.

### **Coastal Protection**

66. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of works his Department is currently progressing in County Clare to mitigate against coastal erosion. [45584/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** Coastal erosion is a natural and ongoing process, which takes place around the entire coastline. The Office of Public Works (OPW) does not have responsibility for the preparation of a national coastal erosion strategy or plan. The OPW's prime responsibility in this area is the management of flood risk. However, the Government has established an Inter-Departmental Group on Managing Coastal Change to scope out an approach for the development of a national co-ordinated and integrated strategy to manage the projected impact of coastal change to our coastal communities, economies, heritage, culture and environment. The Inter-Departmental Group is jointly chaired by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the OPW and will bring forward options and recommendations for the Government to consider.

Coastal protection and localised flooding issues are matters, in the first instance, for each local authority to investigate and address. To assist Local Authorities in managing the coastline for coastal erosion, the OPW has undertaken a national assessment of coastal erosion (including erosion rates) under the Irish Coastal Protection Strategy Study (ICPSS) and the results of this study have been published on the OPW website. This data enables Local Authorities to develop appropriate plans and strategies for the sustainable management of the coastline in their counties.

The Local Authorities may carry out coastal protection works using their own resources. If necessary, they may also put forward proposals to the relevant Government Departments for funding of appropriate measures. Intervention or hard defences has the potential to cause problems further along the coast, any proposed intervention measures are best developed in conjunction with a formal coastal risk management study that has carefully investigated the problem and explored the full range of management options.

The OPW operates the Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Scheme since 2009, under which applications for funding from local authorities for small localised works are considered for measures costing up to €750,000 in each instance. Funding for coastal risk management studies may also be applied for under this scheme. Funding of up to 90% of the cost is available for projects that meet the eligibility criteria including a requirement that the proposed measures are cost beneficial. It is a matter for each local authority to ensure that all the necessary environmental, statutory and regulatory approvals are in place prior to any works being undertaken.

The OPW guidelines for funding applications under the Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Scheme, together with a full list of funding approvals since 2009 is available on the OPW website at [www.gov.ie/opw](http://www.gov.ie/opw)

The OPW has approved €1.2m for coastal protection works, including coastal erosion, Clare County Council since 2009. A summary of these approvals are attached.

Details of funding to Clare County Council for coastal works including coastal erosion works and studies below.

COUNTY: CLARE	COUNTY: CLARE	(Local Authority: Clare County Council)	(Local Authority: Clare County Council)	(Local Authority: Clare County Council)
No.	Project Location	Project Details	Approved Funding (€)	Year of Approval
1	Lahinch & Milton Malbay	Works	45,000	2009
2	Tromara, Quilty	Design and build Gabion wall/mattress protection to beach dunes 100m long	72,000	2011
3	Ballyvaughan	New pipe from turlough to the sea	270,000	2011
4	Liscannor Bay (Clahane, Liscannor & Lahinch)	Coastal erosion & flood risk management study	108,000	2015
5	Kilbaha & New Quay	Coastal erosion & flood risk management study	102,000	2015

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COUNTY: CLARE	COUNTY: CLARE	(Local Authority: Clare County Council)	(Local Authority: Clare County Council)	(Local Authority: Clare County Council)
6	Quilty to Mil- town Malbay (Quilty, Spanish Point & Whites- trand)	Coastal erosion & flood risk management study	65,000	2015
7	Doolin	Coastal erosion & flood risk management study	55,000	2015
8	Cloughauninchy	Coastal erosion & flood risk management study	84,000	2015
9	Cloughaun- minchy (coastal)	Appointment of consultants for detailed design and planning	36,000	2017
10	Rineville, Carrigaholt	To infill the ex- isting revetment as detailed in the application	€90,000	2018
11	Aughinish Is- land, New Quay	Repair breaches in embankment, strengthen & re- inforce embank- ment with rock armour. Repair walls.	€81,000	2019
12	Whitestrans, Miltown Mal- bay	Detailed design and planning	€36,000	2020
13	Spanish Point	Provide rock ar- mour over 75m	€225,000	2020

**Budget 2022**

67. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the plans that are under way to prepare for the changing demographics that will see an increase in the median age of the population, which is currently 38 years, and a corresponding increase in age-related public expenditure as forecast in the Trends in Public Expenditure Review Paper produced by his Department during summer 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45437/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The challenges arising from changing demographics and an ageing population are recognised in the Programme for Government – Our Shared Future. In particular, the Programme for Government provided for the establishment of a Commission on Welfare and Taxation and a Commission

on Pensions.

The terms of reference for the Commission on Welfare and Taxation include: a review of how best the taxation and welfare system can support economic activity and income redistribution, whilst promoting increased employment and prosperity in a resilient inclusive and sustainable way, and ensuring that there are sufficient resources available to meet the costs of public services and supports in the medium and longer term. The terms of reference also set out that the Commission will examine what changes, if any, should be made to the social insurance system, including structure and benefits coverage, while ensuring sustainability. In carrying out this work, the terms of reference outline that the Commission will consider the output of the Pensions Commission regarding sustainability and eligibility issues in respect of State Pension arrangements.

The Commission on Welfare and Taxation is to submit its report to the Minister for Finance by no later than 1 July 2022.

The demographic challenge also arises from a growing population. Ensuring that the necessary infrastructure is in place to meet this challenge is one of the priorities in the National Development Plan. In this context the Summer Economic Statement set out growth of almost 12% in Exchequer capital investment in 2022, with this investment of €11.1 billion as a percentage of modified gross national income (GNI\*) being 4.8%.

Given the requirement to meet the longer-term challenges including from demographics, we must continue to reform and improve the budgetary process in order to enhance Ireland's budgetary framework. The budgetary reforms introduced in recent years, including Performance Budgeting and Equality Budgeting, are focussed on providing the evidence base to support the efficient and effective delivery of services that have a positive impact on people's lives. This work is being further enhanced with the development of the Wellbeing Framework for Ireland that can inform efforts to improve the impact of public policy. This focus on performance and impact of expenditure is an essential element of the expenditure framework as we plan for steady sustainable increases in expenditure over the coming years.

### **Public Sector Pay**

**68. Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the ongoing engagement with the Department of Justice and relevant stakeholders in relation to the restoration of fees to criminal defence barristers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45401/21]

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

I fully acknowledge and appreciate the very important work undertaken by barristers who prosecute and defend cases throughout the criminal courts. My Department has engaged constructively with key stakeholders including the Bar Council of Ireland, the Office of Director of Public Prosecutions and the Department of Justice in relation to this matter. In particular it has sought evidence to support any claims that the reductions imposed are linked to significant recruitment and retention issues, thereby potentially adversely impacting the administration of justice.

While my Department has not yet been provided with evidential data to support such claims,

it remains available to review any further information that may be provided.

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

## **Budget 2022**

69. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the key elements in his expenditure management and spending strategy for Budget 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45683/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Budget 2022 will be framed in the context of:

- continued sustainable increases in core public expenditure with a further significant increase in capital investment;
- provision of exceptional additional funding for temporary supports to address the impacts of Covid-19;
- addressing the impacts of Brexit, in particular through measures to be funded by the Brexit Adjustment Reserve to counter the adverse consequences of the withdrawal of the UK from the EU.

The Summer Economic Statement (SES) laid out up to €8.1 billion in 2022 for non-core, temporary spending under the overall expenditure ceiling of €88.2 billion and a core expenditure ceiling of €80.1 billion. The core expenditure ceiling includes additional core expenditure of €4.2 billion over the 2021 core amount and includes an increase of €1.1 billion, almost 12%, in additional capital funding.

The core current expenditure increase of €3.1 billion proposed for Budget 2022 will provide for existing level of service (ELS) costs and allow for the implementation of new policy measures to enhance public services and social supports. In total, a provision of €2.1 billion is reflected as being earmarked for ELS costs, leaving €1 billion for new measures.

In relation to non-recurring temporary supports, this allocation is targeted at addressing the specific challenges of Covid-19, with up to €7 billion available to fund relevant measures, including under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, with certain of this amount to be held back in a contingency reserve to allow Government respond to the situation with the virus next year. This funding will allow for the phased withdrawal of supports, additional expenditure on income supports as the labour market continues to recover, and for spending on necessary public health measures required for the delivery of public services in a Covid environment.

Decisions on specific measures to be covered by this funding and allocations to Departments will be made as part of the Estimates process. As in 2021, it is intended that all expenditure allocations related to Covid-19 will be separately identified in the Expenditure Report to ensure transparency.

Further to this, Ireland has been allocated €1.1 billion under the EU's Brexit Adjustment Reserve, to fund measures to address the negative impacts of Brexit across the eligible period of the fund. This funding will be allocated across Budget 2022 and Budget 2023 to support employment, businesses and local communities negatively affected by Brexit, including those

in the fishing industry.

*Question No. 70 answered with Question No. 64.*

### **Office of Public Works**

71. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will report on the operation of the entry fee waiver for OPW sites and the subsequent effect on visitor numbers to such sites; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45489/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** In line with the Government's announcement that museums and galleries could reopen from 10th May, the Office of Public Works (OPW) were delighted to commence reopening additional heritage sites from mid-May. Together with the OPW gardens and parklands that had remained open throughout lockdown, our reopened heritage sites played an important role in providing additional amenities for citizens' health and wellbeing and in reviving cultural life. To assist the recovery further, admission charges to all fee-charging OPW heritage sites were waived from 14 May on a temporary basis, until the end of 2021.

Both individual visitors and business clients such as Tour Operators, benefit from the measure. There is no change in respect of other sales such as publications and visitor memorabilia, at OPW heritage sites and the OPW continues to apply facility fee charges in respect of any third party events that arise at sites. All admission charges will be reinstated with effect from 1 January 2022 and will apply at the same levels as previously applied.

The measure was adopted as an incentive to domestic tourism in the summer period and to encourage staycations for Irish citizens. It was also intended that the arrangement would remain in place into the pre-Christmas period to encourage short stay breaks, weekend trips etc. in regional areas particularly. The heritage sites managed by the OPW are widely dispersed regionally and act as prime locator points for tourist ingress, supporting relevant local economic enterprise activity in surrounding areas including accommodation, bars, restaurants, other activity providers etc. and encouraging considerable aggregated economic spin-off.

Fully audited visitor numbers for 2021 are not yet available but anecdotal evidence points to strong visitor numbers when taken in the context of the pandemic and associated site restrictions, notwithstanding that some sites have had to limit capacity in order to meet social distancing requirements.

### **Budget 2022**

72. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the value to date of requests for expenditure increases in Budget 2022 in pre-budget submissions; the main areas for which allocations have been sought; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44807/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Budget 2022 is now less than three weeks away and engagement between my Department and other Departments and Offices is ongoing. In line with the fiscal parameters agreed in the Summer Economic Statement (SES), the expenditure ceiling for 2022 will be €88.2 billion. €80.1 billion of this overall ceiling will be for core expenditure while up to €8.1 billion in non-core, temporary funding will be available for 2022 for measures to respond to the impacts of Covid-19 and for

measures funded from the Brexit Adjustment Reserve.

This €80.1 billion core expenditure ceiling includes additional core expenditure of €4.2 billion over the 2021 core amount. This increased core expenditure includes the €1.1 billion additional capital funding under the National Development Plan and €3.1 billion in additional funding for current expenditure measures. €2.1 billion of this current expenditure increase has been provided to meet pre-commitment costs in relation to demographics, and to meet the carryover costs of prior year measures and of public service pay deals. This leaves €1.0 billion to fund priority new core current expenditure measures.

The National Economic Dialogue (NED) held at the end of June this year provided an opportunity for the various stakeholders to discuss with Ministers issues of concern with them in the run-up to Budget 2022. Discussions at the NED included consideration of issues in relation to prioritisation of budgetary resources and the trade-offs required in order to deliver on societal and economic priorities while returning the public finances to sustainability.

In line with previous years there are requests for additional expenditure that exceed the available resources set out in the SES. This will require prioritisation to ensure that the additional resources are impacting on people's lives and are supporting effective and efficient delivery of public services.

As set out in the SES, and also the subject of discussions at the NED, there is to be a phased withdrawal of the exceptional Covid-19 related expenditure to support recovery through next year. A substantial amount of €7 billion has been earmarked for Covid-19 expenditure to support delivery of public services taking into account public health requirements, provide for a tapered phased withdrawal of supports, and for a contingency reserve to allow Government respond as the situation with the virus evolves next year.

I, along with my officials, am currently involved in the process of working with all Departments and Offices over the coming weeks in relation to the proposals received and finalisation of the funding available at a departmental level and to ensure that the Budget Estimates for next year are settled within the parameters agreed by Government in the SES. Budget settlements will be guided by the goals of the Programme for Government commitment to return the public finances to a more sustainable position while addressing our infrastructure challenges, continuing to enhance our public services and social supports, and supporting a balanced recovery from the pandemic.

### **Flood Risk Management**

**73. Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the progress on flooding project works for Archahan Bridge in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45580/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** Local flooding issues are a matter, in the first instance, for each Local Authority to investigate and address. Where necessary, Local Authorities may put forward proposals to relevant central Government Departments, including the Office of Public Works, for funding of appropriate measures depending on the infrastructure or assets under threat. There is no application on hand for the location mentioned in the Deputy's question.

Under the OPW Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Scheme, applications are considered for projects that are estimated to cost not more than €750,000 in each instance. Funding of up to 90% of the cost is available for approved projects. Applications are

assessed by the OPW having regard to the specific economic, social and environmental criteria of the scheme, including a cost benefit ratio and having regard to the availability of funding for flood risk management. Full details of this scheme are available on [www.opw.ie](http://www.opw.ie).

*Question No. 74 answered with Question No. 6.*

*Question No. 75 answered with Question No. 20.*

*Question No. 76 answered with Question No. 12.*

### **National Lottery**

77. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if the issue of problem gambling will be a consideration of the review of the National Lottery good causes funding distribution model which is currently underway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45410/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As part of the terms of the National Lottery licence, almost 30c from every €1 spent on National Lottery games is returned to the Exchequer to be utilised by Good Cause projects.

I was pleased to recently announce plans to review the transparency and effectiveness of how National Lottery good causes related funding is distributed. This review is reflective of the Department's overall mission, and in embarking on this project we are taking steps to ensure that National Lottery funding is distributed in the most transparent and effective way possible.

While the National Lottery is subject to regulation by an independent National Lottery Regulator, matters pertaining to gambling are a matter for the Minister for Justice. The Programme for Government gives a clear commitment to establish a gambling regulator focused on public safety and well-being, covering gambling online and in person, and the powers to regulate advertising, gambling websites and apps.

The Justice Plan 2021 identifies the enactment of legislation to licence and regulate the gambling industry as a key objective, and I understand that there are plans to publish the general scheme of a Bill which seeks to provide for the establishment of a Gambling Regulator in Q3 2021.

*Question No. 78 answered with Question No. 43.*

*Questions Nos. 79 to 85, inclusive, answered orally.*

### **Disadvantaged Status**

86. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Education the status of the DEIS bands reassessment as committed to earlier in 2021. [45194/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** A key part of the DEIS Plan was the introduction of a new DEIS identification process based on an objective, statistics based model to determine which schools merit inclusion in the DEIS programme. An extensive body of work has been undertaken in terms of the refinement of this model, based on the latest school enrolment data and data available from Census 2016 under the HP Deprivation Index.

A detailed quality analysis of the data has been carried out by members of the DEIS Technical Group which contains representatives of the Department's Statistics and Social Inclusion Units, the Inspectorate and the Educational Research Centre. My Department has commenced a consultation process with education partners on the technical aspects of this model, and work is now ongoing on final elements of the model.

It is envisaged that this will provide the basis for the development and application of a refined DEIS resource allocation model to ultimately match resources to identified need. All schools will be considered for inclusion under the refined DEIS model. Until this work is complete, it is not intended to extend the DEIS programme to any further schools.

Nonetheless, additional resources have been made available to DEIS schools in order to address educational disadvantage, such as an increase in the budget of the School Completion Programme, the expanded Summer Programme which ran this year and the reduction in pupil-teacher ratio for DEIS Band 1 schools.

### **Special Educational Needs**

87. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Education the steps her Department has made to further the availability of ASD education in Dublin 8. [45689/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education is a priority for this Government.

The level of investment in special education, at almost €2 billion, is at an all-time high.

An additional 269 additional special classes are being opened this school-year. This will bring the total number of special classes nationally to 2,118. The new classes provide 1,600 additional places, spread right throughout the country.

Two new special schools are also opening this year, one in Dublin and one in Cork.

Despite this unprecedented increase, I am very aware of the need for further specialist education places in a small number of areas, mainly concentrated in Dublin.

Currently, there are eleven special classes for students with autism attached to mainstream primary and post-primary schools in Dublin 8., three of which opened in September 2021. This also includes an Early Intervention class, providing placements for students in the area.

I acknowledge that any delay in securing a suitable school placement can cause much anguish for parents and families involved.

Delays can happen for a variety of reasons including, for example, assessment reports for children coming available over the summer period while schools were closed. In other cases, parents may change their preference for a class placement and request that their child move from a mainstream class to a special class.

My Department and the NCSE have therefore put in place new planning structures and procedures to ensure sufficient places become available to meet local need. As new need emerges, there is a cohesive response available to ensure places become available in a timely and targeted way.

The willingness of school communities to open special classes is central to ensuring that

every child can obtain a suitable placement. My Department and the NCSE can provide the necessary funding, teaching and SNA resources, professional supports and training so that the required special class places can be provided as soon as possible.

Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) are working closely with parents and schools to address the needs of the Dublin 8 area. My Department will support their work in any way necessary to ensure the required number of school places become available as quickly as possible.

*Questions Nos. 88 and 89 answered orally.*

### **Schools Building Projects**

90. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education when a school (details supplied) will receive funding for a new school building; when is it expected works will start on the new building; and the expected completion date for the new school building. [45234/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The major building project for Gaelcho-láiste Reachrann is to provide a new 600 student school building on the school's existing site.

The project is at an advanced stage of architectural planning, Stage 2(b) - Detailed Design.

In October 2020, in order to expedite the progression of this major building project my Department authorised Dublin and Dun Laoghaire ETB (DDLETB) and its Design Team to commence a pre-qualification process to select a shortlist of contractors, in parallel with the Department's review of the stage 2(b) submission for this project.

The Stage 2(b) report has been reviewed and my Department recently received the necessary Design Team confirmations from each member of the Design Team that they have carried out a final review of all of its tender documentation to ensure compliance with Department requirements.

My Department has this week authorised the ETB and its design team to complete the pre-qualification process to shortlist building contractors and then proceed to Tender Stage.

The construction period is anticipated to be approximately 22 months.

With regard to the temporary accommodation on the site, my Department initiated contact with the ETB in relation to an application for Emergency Works Funding to address roof condition issues with a number of prefabs at the school. This application was submitted to my Department yesterday and was approved.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

91. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education the amount of HEPA filtration that has been acquired by the State for use in schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45189/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Updated guidance for schools on Practical Steps for the Deployment of Good Ventilation Practices in Schools was provided at the end of May following the work of an expert group that carefully considered the role of ventilation in managing COVID-19.

A copy of the guidance is published on the Gov.ie website.

The over-arching approach in the Department’s ventilation guidance for schools is to have windows open as fully as possible when classrooms are not in use and partially open when classrooms are in use. The practical steps and stepwise approach set out in the guidance are sufficient to ensure good ventilation practices in school while at the same time ensuring an appropriate balance between ventilation and comfort.

As part of following through on the updated guidance, the Department has procured CO2 monitors from a central framework and a supply of these are being distributed directly to schools which will assist them in managing their ventilation strategy. 25,000 monitors have been delivered to date with 96% of primary schools (including all special schools) having received their full allocation of CO2. Ten CO2 monitors have been provided to schools at post-primary level with the balance of their allocation expected to be distributed in October.

The Departments guidance also sets out the role air cleaners can play in our schools but it is important to note that they do not remove CO2 and are not a substitute for good ventilation.

A school’s Architect or Engineer can guide a school on whether an Air Cleaner is necessary or appropriate. If an individual school has particular difficulties in managing ventilation the Department is available to guide and support it as required on the appropriate strategy to address same. As part of contingency planning, the Department has put arrangements in place for a small reserve of air cleaners to facilitate quick deployment to any primary or post-primary school which has an immediate need and has been unsuccessful in sourcing locally.

### School Patronage

92. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Education if she is satisfied with the division of secondary school patronages across the country; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43948/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** As the Deputy may be aware there is a broad range of patronage arrangements across the post-primary sector.

In the school year 2020/2021, there were 730 post-primary schools in the post-primary sector comprising voluntary secondary schools, ETB schools, community schools and comprehensive schools.

In terms of ethos, approximately 50% of post-primary schools are either multi-denominational or inter-denominational and the other 50% are denominational.

The table below gives provides an overview of school type in the post-primary school sector including the types of patron involvement in each.

#### Overview of post-primary school type and patron involvement 2020/21

School type	Number of schools	Nature of patron involvement
Voluntary Secondary School	383	Denominational (6 denominations) Inter-denominational Multi-denominational
Community School	82	Inter-Denominational Multi-denominational

Comprehensive School	14	Inter-denominationalDe-nominational
ETB School/College	251	Multi-denominationalInter-denominational
Total schools	730	

If the Deputy wishes for further information on any of these sectors this can be provided.

*Question No. 93 answered orally.*

### School Staff

94. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Education her proposals to regularise pay and conditions for school secretaries. [44740/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School secretaries and caretakers are valued members of our school communities and my Department is fully aware of the vitally important role played by them in the running of our schools.

I welcome the significant progress that has been made through the WRC in recent days. This builds upon previous recommendations of an independent arbitrator for a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim and officials from the Department and school management bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the issues. On the 27th of October 2020, under the auspices of the WRC, an understanding was agreed on a pathway to progress the issues.

Following intensive discussions at the WRC on the 13th September, significant progress has been made in this dispute. Subject to agreement on all elements of the claim, the Department has offered to move School Secretaries' pay rates to a scale which is aligned with the Clerical Officer Grade III pay scale within education and training boards on a pro rata basis with an effective date of implementation for these new pay arrangements of 1st September 2021.

There is also agreement in principle to take the same approach to the consideration of appropriate pay and conditions of grant funded caretakers and when the final package for secretaries has been agreed and an implementation plan in place intensive engagement will begin on achieving that.

I welcome the deferral of the action scheduled for Wednesday 15th September to allow for intensive talks to resume aimed at resolving the claim and agreeing a final package and I look forward to continued progress under the WRC.

*Question No. 95 answered orally.*

### School Transport

96. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Education if she will consider reviewing the 50% school bus transport capacity limit that is currently in operation in the post-primary service; if so, the timeframe for any such review; if she will consider a goodwill provision for late applications for the school transport scheme; and if she will make a statement on the mat-

ter. [45504/21]

**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. This year I have extended measures to 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. This arrangement is in place for current school year pending completion of the full review of the School Transport Scheme.

Children who are not eligible for school transport may apply for transport on a concessionary basis only and are offered seats where capacity exists after all eligible children have been catered for.

Late applicants and/or families who pay late are not guaranteed a seat and will only be allocated a seat if capacity is available once seats are allocated to those families who applied and paid on time for transport services for the 2021/2022 school year.

Planning for school transport for the 2021/22 school year has proceeded on the basis that the public health measures in place as schools closed at the end of the last school year would remain as term began in this new school year. This includes the recommendations from Public Health that post-primary services would operate at 50% capacity and that masks would be worn. However, as the vaccination programme for children on post-primary services is rolled out and as the lifting of restrictions on public transport services proceeds, the capacity limit of 50% on post-primary school transport services will be subject to ongoing review and the Department will be considering the position in this regard over the coming weeks.

Bus Éireann has confirmed that to date 104,324 pupils, including 54,728 post primary eligible pupils and 14,735 post primary concessionary pupils have been issued tickets for the School Transport Scheme. This number is changing as tickets continue to be allocated to pupils. In the region of 98% of all valid and paid on time applicants have been issued with a ticket.

Should post-primary services resume operating at 100% capacity and where additional vehicles that were provided for social distancing purposes are removed, any spare capacity available will be offered on those services to concessionary pupils or late applicants where such capacity exists.

### **School Staff**

97. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Education if her Department will approve new terms and pay levels that are being sought by school secretaries who are not employed directly within the public services. [45186/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School secretaries and caretakers are valued members of our school communities and my Department is fully aware of the vitally important role played by them in the running of our schools.

I welcome the significant progress that has been made through the WRC in recent days. This builds upon previous recommendations of an independent arbitrator for a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim and officials from the Department and school management bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the issues. On the 27th of October 2020, under the auspices of the WRC, an understanding was agreed on a pathway to progress the issues.

Following intensive discussions at the WRC on the 13th September, significant progress has been made in this dispute. Subject to agreement on all elements of the claim, the Department has offered to move School Secretaries' pay rates to a scale which is aligned with the Clerical Officer Grade III pay scale within education and training boards on a pro rata basis with an effective date of implementation for these new pay arrangements of 1st September 2021.

There is also agreement in principle to take the same approach to the consideration of appropriate pay and conditions of grant funded caretakers and when the final package for secretaries has been agreed and an implementation plan in place intensive engagement will begin on achieving that.

I welcome the deferral of the action scheduled for Wednesday 15th September to allow for intensive talks to resume aimed at resolving the claim and agreeing a final package and I look forward to continued progress under the WRC.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

98. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education her views on claims that the official advice from her Department regarding carbon dioxide concentrations in classrooms is unsafe and will not aid in reducing transmission of Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45717/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Good ventilation was identified as an important aspect of public health advice on managing Covid-19 risks. The establishment of an Expert Group on the matter, alongside a sub-group of the main Expert Group focussed exclusively on the issue of improving and monitoring ventilation in schools earlier this year underlines this,

The outcomes of this work formed the basis for the most recent updating of the ventilation guidance for schools and included recommendations in relation to strengthening the message about the importance of good ventilation and the use of Carbon Dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) monitors.

CO<sub>2</sub> is an effective proxy for ventilation but it is not a direct proxy for infection transmission risk. CO<sub>2</sub> monitoring can be used to enable a good balance between ventilation, thermal comfort, and energy use.

As part of following through on this work, my Department its updated guidance for schools on *Practical Steps for the Deployment of Good Ventilation Practices in Schools* in May which is accessible on the Department's website and also procured CO<sub>2</sub> monitors for distribution directly to schools to assist them in managing their ventilation strategy.

The guidance outlines the role that CO<sub>2</sub> monitors can play a part in providing a useful general indication that areas/rooms may not be adequately ventilated and can enable occupants to

become familiar with the impact of activities, outdoor weather and window openings on levels of good ventilation.

My Department's ventilation guidance for schools is very clear and practical on the steps to be taken by all schools to manage ventilation levels. The monitor gives a digital reading but also has an LED display that changes colour like a traffic light. They have pre-set specific bands operating in a "traffic-light style

The digital readings and multi-colour display on the CO2 monitors delivered to schools guide schools on the need to increase ventilation when the reading is above the green display of 800 CO2 parts per million. The practical steps and stepwise approach set out in the Department's guidance will assist good ventilation practices in school while at the same time ensuring an appropriate balance between ventilation and comfort.

If an individual school has particular difficulties in managing ventilation the Department is available to guide and support it as required on the appropriate strategy to address same.

### **Schools Building Projects**

99. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which she remains satisfied regarding the adequacy of the school building programme to meet the requirements in full throughout the country; if she envisages the need to make any special provisions in sensitive areas affected by demographic demand or old buildings in need of urgent replacement; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45601/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department has a strong and ambitious rollout of projects under the school building programme to support the operation of the school system particularly in terms of additional capacity requirements.

During the NDP period 2018-2020, there were **526 completed building projects** under the Large Scale Capital Programme and the Additional School Accommodation Scheme. These projects delivered in excess of **48,000 school places**, including permanent accommodation for **229 special classes** and additional capacity for **67 classrooms in 14 special schools** throughout the country.

There are also currently some 250 school building projects on site many of which will be completed in 2022.

The main focus of resources over the last decade and for the coming period is on provision of additional capacity to cater for increasing demographics.

Enrolments and the demand for school places are kept under constant review. For that reason, my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and utilises a Geographic Information System, using data from a range of sources, including Child Benefit, school enrolment data and information on residential development activity in order to anticipate school place demand and identify capacity requirement priorities which will necessitate action. The assessment is additionally informed by close engagement with school patrons and the local authorities. This strategic planning for school accommodation needs is important in the context of ensuring alignment with the Government's Housing for All Plan.

While much progress has been made to date, the continued modernisation of school facilities will be a priority for my Department under the forthcoming revised NDP to 2030. This increased focus on the upgrade and refurbishment of the existing school stock will be further

to the continued increase of school capacity to keep pace with demographic demand including provision for Special Education Needs.

### **Schools Building Projects**

100. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Education the status of a school (details supplied); the reason for the delay in submitting the planning application until Q1 2022; when permanent road infrastructure will be constructed, including a footpath and cycleway to the school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45627/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The project to provide the permanent building for the school referred to by the Deputy is in early architectural planning which involves site surveys, school design stages and the preparation of statutory applications.

As with all school building projects, pre-planning meetings are required with the Local Authority in advance of preparing a Planning Application. This is 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.

At the pre-planning meeting for the interim accommodation currently on the site, the Local Authority made it clear that the planning application for the permanent accommodation must be cognisant of the overall Shannon Homes Masterplan for the area. Discussions have been ongoing between my Department and Shannon Homes Ltd. in relation to the overall plan for the area. The Shannon Homes Masterplan for the area has been received by my Department and a planning application is being prepared for the additional interim accommodation which the school will require for the 2022/23 academic year.

The permanent road infrastructure, including a footpath and cycleway to the school, is to be constructed by the vendor as a condition of sale of the land. This infrastructure is to be provided on a phased basis in conjunction with the development of the temporary and permanent school facilities.

### **State Examinations**

101. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education if her Department has plans for the leaving certificate exams for 2022; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45214/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** On 30 June this year, 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 that were published in December 2020 in respect of Leaving Certificate 2021.

The adjustments are outlined in the document ‘*Assessment Arrangements for Junior and Leaving Certificate 2022*’, which is available online.

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 the Leaving Certificate Applied programme, for Year 1 and Year 2 students in the 2021/22 school year, has also been published and is available online.

It was also announced, on 30 June that the State Examinations Commission 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.

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.

### **School Transport**

102. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education the status of the school transport review; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45672/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The School Transport Scheme is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department. In the 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, were transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who 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. This year I have extended measures to ensure that 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. This arrangement is in place for current school year pending completion of the full review of the School Transport Scheme. Bus Éireann has confirmed that to date 104,324 pupils, including 54,728 post primary eligible pupils and 14,735 post primary concessionary pupils have been issued tickets for the School Transport Scheme. This number is changing as tickets continue to be allocated to pupils. In the region of 98% of all valid and paid on time applicants have been issued with a ticket.

Children who are not eligible for school transport may apply for transport on a concessionary basis only and are offered seats where capacity exists after all eligible children have been catered for.

My Department commenced a review of the School Transport Scheme in February 2021. The review is being conducted with a view to examining the current scheme, its broader effectiveness and sustainability, and to ensure that it serves students and their families adequately.

Following commencement of this review the Steering Group recently presented me with an initial interim report on eligibility with an examination of issues for mainstream pupils relating to the nearest and next nearest school. Following consideration of this report, I approved the extension of temporary alleviation measures 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 Facilities

103. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Education the criteria for small school status; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45647/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Coming from a rural background, I am very much aware of the huge importance of small schools to communities across Ireland and I have asked my Department to work with the education partners to examine ways to support such schools in their communities and to ensure a more sustainable future for them.

In general, small schools are considered to be schools with four teachers or less. There have been a number of positive measures implemented to support this approach including an improvement of one point in the appointment threshold in primary schools which has been introduced for this school year. Schools are now provided with class teachers on the basis of 1 teacher for every 25 pupils which is a historical low ratio. In addition, a three point reduction in the number of students required to retain a teacher has also been introduced for September 2021. These measures will also help to ensure that less pupils are required to recruit or retain a teacher.

This builds on measures in previous budgets which has seen improvements in the overall allocation of teaching posts and specific targeted measures for small and isolated schools as well as primary schools on our islands.

In August I launched the Small Schools Clusters Action Research Project which is an innovative research project which aims to encourage small schools in a number of clusters to collaborate together and identify common challenges and trial innovative solutions. I hope the learning from this project will help inform the policy approach to supporting small schools.

### Capitation Grants

104. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education her plans to increase the capitation grant for primary schools considering the increased costs to schools of Covid-19 safety measures; and the increase in the cost of providing light and heat. [45589/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department provides funding to Primary and Post-Primary schools by way of per capita grants. The two main grants are the Capitation grant to cater for day to day running costs such as heating, lighting, cleaning, insurance, general up-keep etc. and the Ancillary/School Services Support Fund (SSSF) to cater for the cost of employing ancillary services staff. Schools also receive a range of other grants including Book Grants, Programme grants etc.

I understand the need for improved capitation funding and I am pleased that budget 2020 has been able to provide for a further 2.5% increase in standard capitation funding for primary and post-primary schools that applied from the start of the 2020/21 school year. This builds on the 5% increase in capitation announced in budget 2019.

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

All schools have received the benefit of the capitation increases awarded to date. It is my intention to seek funding for further capitation increases in future budgets. However I must be prudent in the context of ongoing budgetary pressures giving the current economic circumstances.

In addition, under the COVID-19 response plans, a range of supports are being made available to all recognised schools in the free education scheme. To date more than €158 million of additional capitation funding has been made available to primary and post primary schools to provide for Cleaning, PPE and hand hygiene, Enhanced Supervision and employment of an Aide for the school year 2020/21.

My Department has committed to ensuring that the full range of measures necessary to allow schools operate safely in the Covid-19 environment will continue to be available for the 2021/22 school year and is providing a further €57.6 million of additional capitation funding for Term 1 of the 2021/22 school year.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

105. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Education if her Department has given a recommendation to primary level schools that semi-contact sports such as hockey and football are not to be played within the current school term; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45448/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Department is guided by Public Health as to the mitigation measures needed to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in our schools. The aim of all of the Covid-19 infection prevention and control measures that have been put in place for schools is to support schools to operate safely and prevent the introduction of Covid-19 and also the onward of transmission of Covid-19 among the school community. These measures protect pupils, their parents and school staff and are very effective when adhered to. Schools have been told that they should continue to operate the infection prevention and control measures in place in the previous school year. These measure include hand hygiene, respiratory hygiene, physical distancing and staying at home if you are unwell.

Physical activity (PE) is viewed as important part of the school curriculum and pupils should be encouraged to participate in PE provided they are well.

In addition the Government's plan for the final phase of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic "COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting" outlines that outdoor group activities can now take place without restrictions.

This would include sports such as hockey and football. Ultimately it is a matter for each individual school to determine what extracurricular sports the school partakes in. Schools participating in sporting events and activities should refer to the relevant guidelines provided by the various sporting governing bodies.

### **Education Policy**

106. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Education her plans to accommodate the expanding education needs in Tramore, County Waterford with a view both to lands

zoned for education and demographic pressures; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45660/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department considers that the existing schools in Tramore are positioned to meet the educational needs arising from the increased population projected in the draft Waterford City and County Development Plan 2022 -2028.

There are four mainstream primary schools in Tramore and one post-primary school. A significant extension has recently been completed at one of the primary schools and a major capital project is being planned for another of the primary schools.

The post-primary school has a recently completed new building.

My Department has analysed the projected demographic demand for school places in Tramore up to 2028 and considers that in light of the underlying demographics that the existing facilities will meet demand when account is taken of the planned works.

The population of Tramore was 10,381 people in the 2016 Census. The draft Waterford City and County Development Plan 2022 – 2028 plan projects that the population will have increased by 1,168 people to a total of 11,549 by 2031 (an increase of c. 11%).

Tramore is served by four mainstream primary schools and one post-primary school.

The Department has considered the capacity of the existing facilities to meet the projected population increase by taking account of the demographic data of the existing population and including the projected requirements arising from the increase.

In the case of Tramore, the increase in school place requirements resulting from the projected population increase is mitigated by the decline in school place requirements as a result of the underlying demographics of the area. Primary school enrolments in Tramore reached a peak in 2020 and are projected to decline annually for the next six years at least. At post-primary level, enrolments are expected to reach a peak next year, 2022 and to decline steadily over the following years.

### **School Accommodation**

107. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Education the status of progress and the timelines for the delivery of new school accommodation for primary schools (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45436/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The status of the major building projects referred to by the Deputy is as follows:-

#### **Scoil Chronain 19530H**

The permanent school building project for Scoil Chronáin has been assigned to my Department's Design & Build delivery programme. This delivery programme uses a professional external Project Manager to progress the project through the relevant stages of architectural planning, tender and construction.

The planning application for the project was submitted on the 18th August 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.

**St Thomas JNS & Scoil Áine SNS, Lucan RN 19542R & 19676P**

The Board of Management of both these schools have recently agreed to a new schedule of accommodation to include a new 24 classroom school and 3 classroom Special Education Needs base for each school on the existing school site. My Department will be in further contact with the schools in the context of the steps to be taken to progress the project to the next stage of the architectural planning process.

**Divine Mercy JNS 19865S & SNS RN 20187H**

The major building project for Divine Mercy Jnr & Snr schools is currently at an advanced stage of architectural planning Stage 2(b) – Detailed Design. The replacement Consultant Architect is currently carrying out a due diligence review of the Stage 2(b) tender documentation, previously prepared, in conjunction with the other Design Team members. The Consultant Architect will then submit a Due Diligence Report to my Department for review. Upon review, my Department will be in contact with the school regarding the further progression of this project, including pre-qualification of contractors.

**Gaelscoil Chluain Dolcain/Gaelscoil na Camogie, Clondalkin RN 19855P/19991A**

The building project for Gaelscoil Chluain Dolcain, and Gaelscoil na Camóige is currently at tender stage. A Stage 3 tender report identifying a recommended bidder has been submitted to my Department. An initial review has been carried out, however, further information/clarification has been requested from the Design Team. Upon receipt of same, a further review will be carried out.

**Special Educational Needs**

108. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education her plans to improve supports for children with special needs and to ensure that such supports are put in place in a timely manner and eliminate delays in sanctioning posts; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45434/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I understand the Deputy is referring to the arrangements for the allocation of SNAs to schools.

The provision of education for children with special needs is an ongoing priority for Government. The numbers of special classes, special education teachers and Special Needs Assistants are at unprecedented levels.

The Department will spend approximately €2 Billion, or over 20% of its total educational budget on making additional provision for children with special educational needs in 2021.

This represents an increase of over 50% in total expenditure since 2011, at which point €1.247 Billion per annum was provided.

For the 2021/22 school year 2,118 special classes have been provided. This is an increase of 269 classes from the previous school year and will ensure that approximately 12,700 special class places will be available this year, including 1,600 new special class places.

Since 2011, the number of special classes in mainstream schools has increased by almost 386% from 548 to 2,118 for the 2021/2022 school year.

Budget 2021 provided for an additional 990 additional SNAs for allocation to schools,

bringing the total numbers to 18,000 by December 2021.

This allocation of SNAs is to meet the care needs of pupils in 2021 and will enable the establishment of new special classes, creation of new places in special schools, support children in mainstream classes for the 2021/22 school year.

This will represent an increase of increase of 70% in the number of SNAs provided since 2011 at which point 10,575 SNAs were available.

The NCSE have published the SNA allocations on their website [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

Where circumstances change during the course of the 2021/22 school year that materially increase the level of care need in a school to the extent that the school can clearly demonstrate that it cannot be met within the existing SNA allocation, the school may apply to the NCSE for a review. Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website [ncse.ie/for-schools](http://ncse.ie/for-schools).

The NCSE manages the exceptional review process and handles each case individually. Some review requests can be concluded as an office based exercise, whilst others require a school to be visited. The timeframe for concluding a review can vary depending on the school context or the nature of the information provided.

The NCSE has responsibility for planning and coordinating school supports for children with special educational needs including the allocation of SNAs and reviews. The Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations. Accordingly, the question has been referred to the NCSE for direct reply.

### **Special Educational Needs**

109. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Education her plans for increasing of ASD places in the Dublin 2, 4, 6 and 6W areas; the timeline on the delivery of same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45449/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education is a priority for this Government.

The level of investment in special education, at almost €2 billion, is at an all-time high.

An additional 269 special classes are being opened this school-year. This will bring the total number of special classes nationally to 2,118. The new classes provide 1,600 additional places, spread right throughout the country.

Two new special schools are also opening this year, one in Dublin and one in Cork.

Despite this unprecedented increase, I am very aware of the need for further specialist education places in a small number of areas, mainly concentrated in Dublin.

Currently, there are fifteen special classes for students with autism attached to mainstream primary and post-primary schools in Dublin 2, 4, 6 and 6W, ten of which opened this September. This also includes an Early Intervention class, providing placements for students in the area.

I acknowledge that any delay in securing a suitable school placement can cause much an-

guish for parents and families involved.

Delays can happen for a variety of reasons including, for example, assessment reports for children becoming available over the summer period while schools were closed. In other cases, parents may change their preference for a class placement and request that their child move from a mainstream class to a special class.

My Department and the NCSE have therefore put in place new planning structures and procedures to ensure sufficient places become available to meet local need. As new need emerges, there is a cohesive response available to ensure places become available in a timely and targeted way.

The willingness of school communities to open special classes is central to ensuring that every child can obtain a suitable placement. My Department and the NCSE can provide the necessary funding, teaching and SNA resources, professional supports and training so that the required special class places can be provided as soon as possible.

Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) are working closely with parents and schools to address the needs of the Dublin 2, 4, 6 and 6W areas. My Department will support their work in any way necessary to ensure the required number of school places become available as quickly as possible.

### **School Accommodation**

110. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Education the status of the progress and timelines for delivery of new school accommodation for post-primary schools (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45435/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The status of major building projects is as follows:

#### **Holy Family Community School, Rathcoole (RN 91301D)**

This project is currently at an advanced stage of architectural planning, Stage 2(b) Detailed Design, which includes the application for statutory approvals and the preparation of tender documents. All statutory approvals have been secured. The Stage 2(b) report has been reviewed and the Design Team is currently carrying out a final review of its tender documentation and will arrange to submit Design Team Confirmations as soon as this exercise is complete. The Design Team has recently completed the pre-qualification process. Upon receipt of Design Team Confirmations and subject to no issues arising my Department will be in contact with the Design Team and school with regard to the further progression of this project to the next stage of architectural planning, Stage 3 Tender Stage. Subject to no issues arising a tender normally takes between 6 and 8 months to complete.

#### **St. Joseph's College, Lucan (RN 62063V)**

This project is also at an advanced stage of architectural planning, Stage 2(b) Detailed Design. The Stage 2(b) report has been reviewed by my Department and comments have issued to the Design Team who have been requested to carry out a final review of all of its tender documentation to ensure compliance with Department requirements and to submit written confirmation from each Design Team member when this work has been completed. The pre-qualification process to select a shortlist of contractors has been completed. Upon receipt of Design Team Confirmations and subject to no issues arising, my Department will be in contact

with the Design Team and school with regard to the further progression of this project to the next stage of architectural planning, Stage 3 Tender Stage. Subject to no issues arising, a tender normally takes between 6 and 8 months to complete.

### **Griffeen Community College (RN 76454S)**

The permanent school building project for Griffeen Community College has been assigned to my Department's Design & Build delivery programme. This delivery programme uses a professional external Project Manager to progress the project through the relevant stages of architectural planning, tender and construction.

An application for Planning Permission in respect of the works was submitted to the relevant Local Authority in June 2021. A Request for Further Information (RFI) has been received and my Department's Project Manager are actively working on the response to the RFI which will issue as soon as possible.

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.

### **Lucan Community College (RN 70080T)**

This project is also at an advanced stage of architectural planning, Stage 2(b) Detailed Design, which includes the application for statutory approvals and the preparation of tender documents. The Stage 2(b) report has been reviewed and the Design Team has carried out a final review of all tender documentation and provided my Department with Design Team Confirmations that this final review has been carried out. The pre-qualification process, to select a shortlist of candidates to whom the project will be tendered, is nearing completion. Upon completion, my Department will be in contact with the school Patron with regard to the further progression of this project to the next stage of architectural planning, Stage 3 Tender Stage. Subject to no issues arising, a tender normally takes between 6 and 8 months to complete.

## **School Funding**

111. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Education the progress that has been made with increasing the annual funding levels available to primary education; the progress made with the regularisation of employment conditions for school secretaries and caretakers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45641/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department provides funding to Primary and Post-Primary schools by way of per capita grants. The two main grants are the Capitation grant to cater for day to day running costs such as heating, lighting, cleaning, insurance, general up-keep etc. and the Ancillary/School Services Support Fund (SSSF) to cater for the cost of employing ancillary services staff. Schools also receive a range of other grants including Book Grants, Programme grants etc.

I understand the need for improved capitation funding and I was pleased that budget 2020 was able to provide for a further 2.5% increase in standard capitation funding for primary and post-primary schools that applied from the start of the 2020/21 school year.

This builds on the 5% increase in capitation announced in budget 2019 and the combined increases given in 2019 and 2020 mean that circa 40% restoration has been achieved.

All schools have received the benefit of the capitation increases awarded to date. It is my intention to seek funding for further capitation increases in future budgets. However I must be prudent in the context of ongoing budgetary pressures giving the current economic circumstances.

With regard to school secretaries and caretakers, I know from my own experience that they are valued members of our school communities and my Department is fully aware of the vitally important role played by them in the running of our schools.

The Department previously fully implemented and funded the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator for a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim and officials from the Department and school management bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the issues. On the 27th of October 2020, under the auspices of the WRC, an understanding was agreed on a pathway to progress the issues. Several key strands have been identified, and a phased approach is being taken to the development of proposals.

Following intensive discussions at the WRC on 13th September, there has been significant progress in this dispute. Subject to agreement on all elements of the claim, the Department has offered to move School Secretaries' pay rates to a scale which is aligned with the Clerical Officer Grade III pay scale within education and training boards on a pro rata basis with an effective date of implementation for these new pay arrangements of 1st September 2021. Pay rates will be pro rata according to a secretary's current working pattern. The assimilation of School Secretaries to the CO Grade III pay scale will require further dialogue between the parties and an intensive engagement will take place of over the next two/three weeks to allow this to be finalised.

My Department has also offered to improve the conditions for School Secretaries with regard to sick leave, annual leave and maternity provisions for this cohort of staff. This will take place via direct engagement with the unions in the coming weeks in addition to engagement on other elements of the claim and subject to all elements being agreed.

While there is agreement in principle to take the same approach to the consideration of appropriate pay and conditions of grant funded caretakers there remains a deficit of data on working terms and conditions of such staff. When the final package for secretaries has been agreed and an implementation plan in place for schools and DE, that intensive engagement will begin on regularising the pay and conditions of grant funded caretakers.

I welcome the deferral of the action scheduled for Wednesday 15th September to allow for intensive talks to resume aimed at resolving the claim and agreeing a final package and I look forward to further progress being advanced.

## **State Examinations**

112. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if she plans to alter or reform the leaving certificate examination through alternative assessments after the experiences of the State examinations over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic and the work carried out by the NCCA for the reform of State examinations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45719/21]

**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, parents, teachers, 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 of this year, 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 the document '*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 the Leaving Certificate Applied programme for 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.

While the above adjustments relate to the 2022 State examinations, the Deputy will be aware that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has undertaken an extensive review of senior cycle programmes and vocational pathways, including Transition Year, the Leaving Certificate Applied, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Established.

The review involved a very extensive range of research, consultations and communications with a wide range of stakeholders on all aspects of review and redevelopment over a number of phases over the period of the review. The NCCA also commissioned external expertise to support the process, including the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

The NCCA's *Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report* was submitted to my Department on 27 May for consideration and will be published shortly.

### **School Transport**

113. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education if she has plans to increase the capacity of the school transport service in view of changing public health advice; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45179/21]

160. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education if she will increase the capacity of the school transport service in view of changing public health advice; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45178/21]

174. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education when it is proposed to increase school bus capacity in view of the difficulties that have occurred for many families in having school transport provided for their children; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45433/21]

259. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education the status of plans to increase the capacity of school transport in view of the fact an increase would accommodate many more students who are currently awaiting tickets on routes. [45782/21]

260. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Education if she will review the 50% occupancy rule for school transport in rural Ireland to allow children who previously had concessionary bus tickets to travel on the school bus in view of the fact that this is causing undue hardship for parents who have had to source alternative means of transport at short notice to get them to school and given the latest information from NPHET that the country is on track for lifting of most restrictions from 22 October 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45790/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 113, 160, 174, 259 and 260 together.

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.

Planning for school transport for the 2021/22 school year has proceeded on the basis that the public health measures in place as schools closed at the end of the last school year would remain as term began in this new school year. This includes the recommendations from Public Health that post-primary services would operate at 50% capacity and that masks would be worn. All other measures relating to hygiene, pre-assigned seating, cleaning and the wearing of masks by post-primary students are also in place. However, as the vaccination programme for children on post-primary services is rolled out and as the lifting of restrictions on public transport services proceeds, the capacity limit of 50% on post-primary school transport services will be subject to ongoing review and the Department will be considering the position in this regard over the coming weeks.

Bus Éireann has confirmed that to date 104,324 pupils, including 54,728 post primary eligible pupils and 14,735 post primary concessionary pupils have been issued tickets for the School Transport Scheme. This number is changing as tickets continue to be allocated to pupils.

Should post-primary services resume operating at 100% capacity and where additional vehicles that were provided for social distancing purposes are removed, any spare capacity available will be offered on those services to concessionary pupils or late applicants where such capacity exists.

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

114. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education the instructions she has given to schools on the way they must respond to Covid-19 cases including on isolation of close contacts of symptomatic and asymptomatic cases. [45680/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Covid-19 Response Plans have issued directly to schools for the new school year. These plans are based on the Government's Work Safely Protocol which reflects the most up to date public health advice for the workplace. They set out the range of measures required to prevent the spread of Covid-19 and provide clear and helpful guidance for the safe operation of school through prevention, early detection and control of Covid-19. These plans are living documents and will be updated as public health guidance is updated. The infection prevention and control measures in place in schools have worked very effectively to prevent and control Covid-19 in schools and remain in place for this school year.

In line with recommendations from the National Public Health Emergency Team, from 27th September, which was accepted by the Minister for Health, automatic contact tracing of asymptomatic close contacts in children aged over 3 months and less than 13 years, in schools will no longer take place. Children who are deemed to be close contacts outside of a household setting will not be routinely required to restrict their movements and be tested.

Any pupil/student who has symptoms which could be consistent with Covid-19 should not attend school. This will help to keep covid-19 out of schools in the first place.

The Department will continue to work with the HSE public health to support schools dealing with Covid-19.

### **School Transport**

115. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Education if she has engaged with Bus Éireann regarding bus ticket shortages in counties Cavan, Monaghan and Louth; if she will detail the types of engagement she has had with Bus Éireann; and the dates in which this engagement took place. [45191/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the 2020/21 year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

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 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 102,420 pupils, including 54,018 post primary eligible pupils and 14,143 post primary concessionary pupils have been issued tickets for the School Transport Scheme. This number is changing as tickets continue to be allocated to pupils.

Should post-primary services resume operating at 100% capacity and where additional vehicles that were provided for social distancing purposes are removed, any spare capacity available will be offered on those services to concessionary pupils or late applicants where such capacity exists.

Officials of the School Transport Section have engaged intensively with Bus Éireann in regard to the operation of school transport services for the current school year. If the Deputy has specific queries in regard to the areas referred to officials in School Transport Section would be happy to assist.

### **Special Educational Needs**

116. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if she will discuss the difficulties new and developing schools are facing in accessing special educational supports. [45694/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I am aware of concerns raised by a number of schools with growing enrolments regarding their special education teacher allocation.

There are now over 13,600 Special Education Teachers allocated to mainstream primary and post primary schools.

This represents an increase of 40% in the total number of special education teachers allocated to schools since 2011, at which time 9,740 teachers were allocated.

The allocations are based on the profiled needs of schools, and are designed to be updated, based on new school profile data, every 2-3 years.

In order to minimise disruption and upheaval for schools as much as possible in light of Covid-19, and to provide for continuity of allocations, the existing Special Education Teacher Allocations for schools is being maintained for the 2021/22 school year, with re-profiled allocations now due to be made from September 2022.

The allocations for 2021/22 which are being maintained comprise the allocations made for schools from September 2019 plus any additionality achieved since and any developing hours for the 2019/20 and 2020/21 school years.

This means that schools did not have to engage in an extensive redeployment of posts, or re-clustering, this year.

It also means that schools had greater levels of certainty as to the staff that were in place for September.

It is important to note that no school saw a cut, or reduction, to their special education teaching support for 2021/22.

Additional allocations continue to be made for new schools, schools which achieve developing status, and for exceptional circumstances. Schools that qualify for additional mainstream developing school posts also qualify for additional special education teaching allocations to take account of this developing status.

For the 2021/22 school year, in order to support schools to plan for their staffing arrangements in September, the DES/NCSE brought forward the developing schools allocation process, by initially making provisional allocations for schools

The provisional additional allocations were based on schools projected enrolments, where schools have projected that they will receive developing allocations, based on the criteria below. The allocation of these additional hours will be confirmed once the increased enrolments

are confirmed.

The criteria for qualification for mainstream school developing school posts are set out in the DES Circular Primary and Post Primary School Staffing Schedules each year.

Schools who qualify for additional mainstream developing school posts in accordance with these criteria, also qualify for additional Special Education Teaching Allocations to take account of this developing status, as follows:

- an additional 3 hours of SEN teaching support will be provided for schools which have one developing post, or for a schools first developing post where they have more than one developing post

- and 5 hours per each post thereafter, for each school which has two or more developing posts

If a school considers that exceptional circumstances have arisen in their school, which means that they cannot provide for the special educational teaching needs of pupils due to very significant changes to the school profile occurring, a school may seek a review of their allocations by the NCSE.

My Department continues to engage with Education partners to consider concerns in relation to the existing process for providing additional supports to developing schools and to establish if any improvements can be made to the process.

### **Special Educational Needs**

117. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Education her views on the progress of the recruitment of additional special needs assistants outlined in Budget 2021; the number of special needs assistants currently employed by county; the way this compares with annual figures for the previous ten years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45503/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The provision of education for children with special needs is an ongoing priority for Government. The numbers of special classes, special education teachers and Special Needs Assistants are at unprecedented levels.

The Department will spend approximately €2 Billion, or over 20% of its total educational budget on making additional provision for children with special educational needs in 2021.

This represents an increase of over 50% in total expenditure since 2011, at which point €1.247 Billion per annum was provided.

Budget 2021 provided for an additional 990 additional SNAs for allocation to schools, bringing the total numbers to 18,000 by December 2021.

This allocation of SNAs is to meet the care needs of pupils in 2021 and will enable the establishment of new special classes, creation of new places in special schools, support children in mainstream classes for the 2021/22 school year.

This will represent an increase of increase of 70% in the number of SNAs provided since 2011 at which point 10,575 SNAs were available.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is responsible for the planning and

coordination of education provision for children with special educational needs including the allocation of SNA posts.

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 publish statistics on SNA allocations to primary, post primary and special schools in tabular form, by county, for each school year, this information is available on their website, [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

Special Needs Assistants are employed by schools. Information on appointments made is not collected from schools.

The Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations. Accordingly your question has been forwarded to the NCSE for direct reply.

### School Staff

118. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education the progress made with regard to ensuring public service status for school secretaries and caretakers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45658/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School secretaries and caretakers are valued members of our school communities and my Department is fully aware of the vitally important role played by them in the running of our schools.

The Department previously fully implemented and funded the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator for a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim and officials from the Department and school management bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the issues. On the 27th of October 2020, under the auspices of the WRC, an understanding was agreed on a pathway to progress the issues. Several key strands have been identified, and a phased approach is being taken to the development of proposals.

Following intensive discussions at the WRC on 13th September, there has been significant progress in this dispute. Subject to agreement on all elements of the claim, the Department has offered to move School Secretaries' pay rates to a scale which is aligned with the Clerical Officer Grade III pay scale within education and training boards on a pro rata basis with an effective date of implementation for these new pay arrangements of 1st September 2021. Pay rates will be pro rata according to a secretary's current working pattern. The assimilation of School Secretaries to the CO Grade III pay scale will require further dialogue between the parties and an intensive engagement will take place over the next two/three weeks to allow this to be finalised.

My Department has also offered to improve the conditions for School Secretaries with regard to sick leave, annual leave and maternity provisions for this cohort of staff. This will take place via direct engagement with the unions in the coming weeks in addition to engagement on other elements of the claim and subject to all elements being agreed.

While there is agreement in principle to take the same approach to the consideration of appropriate pay and conditions of grant funded caretakers there remains a deficit of data on working terms and conditions of such staff. When the final package for secretaries has been agreed and an implementation plan in place for schools and DE, that intensive engagement will begin on regularising the pay and conditions of grant funded caretakers.

I welcome the deferral of the action scheduled for Wednesday 15th September to allow for intensive talks to resume aimed at resolving the claim and agreeing a final package and I look forward to further progress being advanced.

### **Departmental Reports**

119. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education the status of the review of the pilot PPP schools bundle 2019-2021 report, including the assessment of whether the project objectives have been met; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45671/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I wish to confirm that the review is completed and the completed report was published in July 2021 and includes the relevant assessment referred to by the Deputy. The report can be located at the following link: [www.gov.ie/en/publication/2b005-review-of-the-pilot-ppp-schools-bundle-2019-2021](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2b005-review-of-the-pilot-ppp-schools-bundle-2019-2021).

The completed report provides a comprehensive comparative analysis between the projects delivered under the pilot PPP schools bundle and some equivalent schools delivered at that time through conventional delivery mechanisms.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

120. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education if her Department will publish the documentation involved in the order, acquisition and checking of CO2 monitors for schools; the cost of same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45188/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Managing ventilation is just one of a suite of public health measures in place to keep our schools safe. Updated guidance for schools on Practical Steps for the Deployment of Good Ventilation Practices in Schools was provided at the end of May following the work of an expert group that carefully considered the role of ventilation in managing COVID-19.

A copy of the guidance is published on the Gov.ie website.

The over-arching approach in the guidance is for schools to have windows open as fully as possible when classrooms are not in use and partially open when classrooms are in use.

The guidance outlines that Carbon Dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) monitors can play a part in providing a useful general indication that areas/rooms may not be adequately ventilated. They can enable occupants to become familiar with the impacts of activities, outdoor weather and window openings on levels of good ventilation.

My Department procured portable monitors that are currently being distributed to schools – between 2 and 20 at primary school level and between 20 and 35 at post-primary school level depending on school size, at an estimated overall cost of €4 million. The monitors are portable, simple to use, and will give a digital reading.

The procurement of the monitors was carried out through a Multi-Supplier Framework established by the Education Procurement Service to run from 2020 to 2024 following an open competitive procurement process. A mini competition for the supply of the CO2 monitors to schools under that Framework was undertaken in April 2021. The responses were assessed by the Education Procurement Service with the CO2 monitors evaluated against the performance specification. Lennox Laboratory Supplies Ltd. was the most economically advantageous tender and an order was placed following the successful conclusion of that process.

Deliveries of CO2 monitors to schools commenced in the third week of August. In total, it involves over 35,000 CO2 monitors being distributed to, primary and post-primary schools. 25,000 CO2 monitors have been distributed to schools which has facilitated monitors being provided to each school.

96% of primary schools (including all special schools) having received their full allocation of CO2. Ten CO2 monitors have been provided to schools at post-primary level with the balance of their allocation expected to be distributed in October.

### School Facilities

121. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education if she will work with a school and an organisation (details supplied) to ensure that the pitches used by the college for generations are kept for use of the college, the local community and sports clubs into the future; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45643/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The lands to which the Deputy refers are in private ownership and my Department understands that they are the subject of a legally binding contract.

An application under the Strategic Housing Development (SHD) process for the development of the lands referred to by the Deputy has been submitted to An Bord Pleanála. My Department, as a prescribed body, was recently notified of the application and invited to submit its observations to An Bord Pleanála. In considering such matters my Department has regard to current and future school requirements in the area in which the site is located. This will form the basis for the response to An Bord Pleanála.

Due to the legal ownership position and the planning application to be considered by An Bord Pleanála, my Department does not consider it would be appropriate to seek an intervention in this matter in the manner suggested by the Deputy.

### School Textbooks

122. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education her plans to ensure universal availability of a schoolbook rental scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45175/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department provides a book grant to all recognised primary and post primary schools within the Free Education Scheme in order to provide assistance for books including Book Rental Schemes. Under this scheme, the Department provided funding of €17.2 million in 2021 to all of these schools.

School book rental schemes have an important role to play in reducing the cost of school books for parents and in order to support the establishment of book rental schemes my Depart-

ment provided €15.7 million seed capital in 2014, 2015 and 2016 to primary schools. Circa 96% of primary schools and 69% of post-primary schools operate a book rental scheme.

It is a matter for the Board of Management of each individual school to decide on its own policy in relation to the use of book grant funding in the school but they are expected to adopt a cost-conscious approach to the selection of books for use in their classes. The current arrangement relies on the local knowledge of the school in order to ensure a fair allocation of funds to those most in need.

Additional funding of €1million provided under Budget 2020 was allocated to 102 Primary DEIS schools for a new pilot programme for the 2020/21 school year. I have recently secured funding to continue this for the 2021/22 school year.

The aim of this pilot is to provide free school books for students in the schools involved, and to support these schools in eliminating the cost of school books for parents. It will continue to run for the 2021/22 school year and its effectiveness and impact will be monitored and evaluated before any decision is made as regards its possible extension or continuation. Under Circular 46/2013, DEIS schools receive a book grant of €21 per student. This pilot provided an additional €64 per student to increase the overall book grant rate to €85 per student enrolled in the school. This additional funding has issued to schools.

My Department does not hold information in relation to the cost of school books but an indicative estimate of providing free primary and secondary school books to all pupils across all fully publicly funded schools based on a survey by Barnardos is €40m.

### **Education Schemes**

123. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Education her plans to address educational disadvantage which has worsened due to the Covid-19 pandemic. [45597/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** DEIS – Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools is the main policy initiative of my Department to address educational disadvantage at school level.

In the 2021/22 academic year there are 884 schools in the DEIS Programme serving over 186,000 pupils - 687 Primary and 197 Post Primary.

My Department will spend over €150 million on the DEIS Programme in 2021, which includes some €26.07 million for the School Completion Programme.

The full list of supports available under the DEIS Programme for the 2021/22 school year is available on Gov.ie at the following link [www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4018ea-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/](http://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4018ea-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/)

I recently announced that a COVID Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS) has been put in place for the 2021/22 school year to help all schools mitigate the adverse impacts of Covid-19 on pupil/student learning loss and wellbeing arising from the periods of school closures in 2020 and 2021.

Under the programme, a block of additional teaching hours is being provided to each recognised school, from which schools can provide additional teaching support for the pupils/students who have experienced difficulties in settling back into school and engaging with learning.

The allocations of additional teaching hours are provided on a graduated and proportion-

ate basis, based on school size, using the 2020/21 school enrolments data, as published on the Primary (POD) and Post Primary Online Databases (PPOD).

Enhanced allocations are also being provided for special schools and schools participating in the DEIS Programme. Schools may use the additional allocation of teaching hours in accordance with the needs of their students. This will enable schools to identify students most at risk of learning loss arising from the recent disrupted school experience and put in place specific targeted teaching supports to meet these students' needs. The additional hours can be utilized by schools from October of this year, to the end of the 2021/22 school year.

Full detail of the programme is set out in Department circular 045/2021 which is available at [www.gov.ie/en/circular/aec0a-covid-learning-and-support-scheme/](http://www.gov.ie/en/circular/aec0a-covid-learning-and-support-scheme/).

### **Pupil-Teacher Ratio**

124. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Education her plans to tackle large class sizes; if a commitment will be made to undertake an audit of class sizes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45567/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Under the Programme for Government there is a commitment to seek to make further progress in reducing the pupil teacher ratios in primary schools.

Teacher allocations to all schools are approved annually by my Department in accordance with established rules based on recognised pupil enrolment on the previous 30 September. The criteria for the allocation of posts are communicated to school management annually and are available on the Department website.

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 classroom teacher for every 25 pupils. This is the lowest pupil teacher ratio ever at primary school.

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. This compares favourably with the OECD pupil teacher ratio which is 1:15. The staffing schedule has improved from 28:1 to 25:1 and 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 for this school year, and statistics on this will be published later in the year.

At post primary level, teachers are currently allocated at a ratio of 19:1 in the free education system and 23:1 to schools in the fee charging sector. As part of COVID-19 operational supports, 1,000 additional teachers have been allocated to post-primary schools to help reduce class sizes. A teacher allocation equivalent to a pupil teacher ratio reduction of 0.6 has been allocated to schools in the free scheme. This allocation supports the important work of teaching and learning and provide additional teachers needed to support teacher substitution, management of physical distancing requirements by reallocating class timetables in schools to smaller groups class sizes where necessary. These posts will also provide for management supports. In addition an allocation, equivalent to a pupil teacher ratio reduction of 0.1 has been provided in respect of Guidance provision to support student wellbeing.

Any further improvement will have to be considered in the context of the annual budgetary process.

The Statistics Section of my Department's website contains extensive data in relation to our schools including pupil teacher ratios and teacher numbers.

### **Special Educational Needs**

125. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the difficulty parents have in engaging a list of suitably qualified special needs assistants particularly in relation to the home-based summer programme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45577/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I am aware of the difficulty experienced by some parents in sourcing teachers to come into their home to provide tuition to their child under the home based strand of the summer programme.

In this regard, it is not practical for my Department to maintain lists of teachers and SNAs who are willing to work on the summer programme at a local level throughout the country. For this reason, my Department engaged with the NCSE and the IPPN on the publication of a list of teachers and SNAs who would be available to do this work. Schools were also requested to support parents in sourcing a teacher of a an SNA in the local area.

In addition, the home based strand could be availed of over the summer vacation period thereby providing flexibility for parents.

Teachers and SNAs were permitted to work with more than one family over the course of the summer, once they adhered to the terms of the scheme, and the COVID-19 guidance provided.

The issue of support and information for parents will be considered in the planned review of the summer programme.

My Department's Summer Programme for 2020 was a significant expansion on the July Provision programme of previous years, and was expanded further for Summer 2021. This was in recognition of the disruptions caused to children with complex needs during the COVID-related school closures in 2020 and 2021.

### **Schools Building Projects**

126. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Education the status of building works to be carried out on a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45409/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The major building project for the school referred to by the Deputy is at an advanced stage of architectural planning, Stage 2(b) - Detailed Design.

In October 2020, in order to expedite the progression of this major building project the Department authorised DDLETB and its Design Team to commence a pre-qualification process to select a shortlist of contractors, in parallel with the Department's review of the stage 2(b) submission for this project.

The Stage 2(b) report has been reviewed and my Department recently received Design Team confirmations from each member of the Design Team that they have carried out a final review of all of its tender documentation to ensure compliance with Department requirements.

My Department has this week authorised the ETB and its design team to complete the pre-qualification process to shortlist building contractors and then proceed to Tender Stage.

### Departmental Expenditure

127. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education the measures she is planning to take to ensure that spending is at least brought into line with the OECD average of 4.9% of GDP in view of the recent OECD report that ranks Ireland lowest in education spending; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45644/21]

158. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education the current and planned investment in primary and secondary education in the context of recent findings of the OECD report *Education at a Glance 2021*; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45669/21]

186. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education the actions she will take to increase education spending to bring Ireland up to at least the OECD average of 4.9% of GDP given that according to the OECD, Ireland has the lowest spending on education out of 36 countries at just 3.3% of GDP. [45682/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 127, 158 and 186 together.

There are various expenditure measures presented in the OECD's most recent *Education at a Glance*, and expenditure as a percentage of GDP is just one of them. Ireland has consistently argued that, given the well-known measurement issues with GDP due to globalisation effects, an alternative measure should be used. This is acknowledged in the methodological notes of the report which notes that in 2016 Ireland produced a modified estimate of the gross national income (GNI\*) that was recommended by the Economic Statistics Review Group and which is designed to specifically exclude these effects.

An alternative measure of government commitment to education spending can be seen in our measure of public expenditure on education as a percentage of total public expenditure, which in 2018 stood at 12.6%, well above the OECD average which stood at 10.7%. Ireland was ranked tenth for this indicator in the OECD report.

With regard to funding for education it should be noted that in the *Programme for Government – Our Shared Future*, this Government is committed to building a world class education system.

Over recent budgets, additional resources have been made available to our schools, including through the delivery of thousands of extra teaching and Special Needs Assistant posts, increased capitation in schools, enhanced supports for school leadership and an improved staffing schedule in primary schools. This is in addition to the significant COVID-19 financial resources provided in 2020 and again in 2021 to allow schools to operate in accordance with the latest public health guidance.

In the context of Budget 2022 we will continue to aim to deliver on the commitments set out in the *Programme for Government*, to meet demographic and other pressures in the school sec-

tor and to support and sustain our schools, their staff and our students in the face of the ongoing significant challenges posed by COVID-19.

### **Special Educational Needs**

128. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Education the number of primary schools that are awaiting exceptional reviews for adapted special needs assistants allocation. [45195/21]

**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. My Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations. Accordingly your question has been forwarded to the NCSE for direct reply.

The NCSE manages the exceptional review process and handles each case individually. Some review requests can be concluded as an office based exercise, whilst others require a school to be visited. The timeframe for concluding a review can vary depending on the school context or the nature of the information provided.

In processing applications for an exceptional review of SNA support, the NCSE considers each application on the basis of the information provided by the school. Schools are required to use their existing allocation and deploy SNAs in support of the care needs as they are currently presenting in the school. The NCSE examines the application to identify whether there has been a significant change in the profile of care needs in the school. In some cases an additional allocation is required and is subsequently made available to the school. As advised in the Guidelines on the SNA Exceptional Review process published on the NCSE website, priority is given to schools with no or limited SNA resources and to rapidly developing schools.

For the 2020/21 Exceptional Review process, given the particular public health requirements and the fact that school buildings were closed for some of the year, wherever possible the opportunity was taken to conclude a review as an office based exercise. In most cases this resulted with the review being brought to a conclusion without a school visit. However, in some cases it was also necessary to visit the school in order to complete the process and 332 such school visits took place. The school visit provides an opportunity to engage with teachers, SNAs and school management on the effective deployment of SNAs in the school and the NCSE is thankful to schools for facilitating their taking place.

The NCSE have confirmed that as at the end of August 2021, 532 schools had submitted applications for exceptional review. Of these, 136 schools are awaiting an outcome.

### **School Transport**

129. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Education if she will reconsider the 50% capacity rule on buses for post-primary schools in line with 100% capacity on public transport; if she has sought advice on an increase in capacity from public health bodies; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45574/21]

**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.

Planning for school transport for the 2021/22 school year has proceeded on the basis that the public health measures in place as schools closed at the end of the last school year would remain as term began in this new school year. This includes the recommendations from Public Health that post-primary services would operate at 50% capacity and that masks would be worn. All other measures relating to hygiene, pre-assigned seating, cleaning and the wearing of masks by post-primary students are also in place. However, as the vaccination programme for children on post-primary services is rolled out and as the lifting of restrictions on public transport services proceeds, the capacity limit of 50% on post-primary school transport services will be subject to ongoing review and the Department will be considering the position in this regard over the coming weeks.

Bus Éireann has confirmed that to date 104,324 pupils, including 54,728 post primary eligible pupils and 14,735 post primary concessionary pupils have been issued tickets for the School Transport Scheme. This number is changing as tickets continue to be allocated to pupils.

Should post-primary services resume operating at 100% capacity and where additional vehicles that were provided for social distancing purposes are removed, any spare capacity available will be offered on those services to concessionary pupils or late applicants where such capacity exists.

### **Special Educational Needs**

130. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the status of the summer programme for 2021 including registrations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45676/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** In May 2021 the Government announced a package of supports to enable all primary and post primary schools to offer a summer programme for students with complex special educational needs and those at greatest risk of educational disadvantage.

The total funding made available to provide a summer programme this year is up to €40 million, a one hundred per cent increase on the allocation for 2020. The programme was developed following engagement with education stakeholders, parent and disability advocacy groups.

The programme's aims were to support pupils to maintain their connection with education,

build their confidence and increase their motivation, promote wellbeing and help to ensure that those at key transition stages could continue their education journey in September. either in school or in further/higher education or training.

The programmes on offer this summer included a new 2-3 week summer programme available to all primary schools and an expansion of the existing programmes in special schools and classes and in DEIS schools. This range of programmes offered built on the success of the expanded programmes that ran in 2020 and incorporated feedback from education stakeholders as to how to better support the programme for all involved in 2021.

An online registration portal for schools for the summer programmes opened on 20 May and closed on 25 June. Schools had the flexibility to run their summer programme at any stage during the summer holidays. Registrations of interest in the programmes were received in respect of an estimated 34,000 students.

A home-based summer programme was available for students with complex special educational needs where a place on a school-based programme was not available. Under this strand, parents engaged the services of a teacher or SNA in a private arrangement which the Department then funds. Parents could use the hours over four weeks of the summer holidays. The closing date for receipt of completed forms for the home-based programme was 03 September 2021.

Claims from schools and parents are currently being processed. Final figures on participation will be available once all claims have been processed.

### **School Enrolments**

131. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education if the current and projected enrolment at a school (details supplied) will be urgently examined; and the way that accommodation can be suitably provided to meet the needs of the school. [45579/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department is in receipt of an application for additional school accommodation (ASA) from the school authority in question.

Officials from my Department have corresponded with the school authority and on receipt of their response the application will be progressed and the decision will issue to the school authority directly.

The purpose of the ASA scheme is to ensure that essential mainstream classroom and Special Education Needs (SEN) accommodation is available to cater for pupils enrolled each year, where the need cannot be met by the school's existing accommodation.

At primary level, this situation generally arises to cater for a school's accommodation requirements where an additional teaching post has been sanctioned by Teacher Allocation Section, or a new SEN class has been sanctioned by the NCSE, and all available alternative accommodation within the school is already being used for classroom purposes.

### **State Examinations**

132. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Education the measures that are being considered to overhaul the leaving certificate system; and if she will make a statement on the

matter. [45431/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Between 2016 and 2020, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) undertook an extensive review of senior cycle programmes and vocational pathways, to include Transition Year, the Leaving Certificate Applied, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Established.

The review involved a very broad range of research, consultations and communications with a wide range of stakeholders, on all aspects of review and redevelopment over a number of phases over the period of the review. The NCCA also commissioned external expertise to support the process, including the ESRI and the OECD.

The Advisory Report, maps out, in broad terms, an ambitious programme of work, which would enable the development and construction of the components that would make up a Framework for Senior Cycle and will involve further ongoing stakeholder engagement and consultation.

The NCCA's *Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report* has been submitted to my Department for consideration and will be published in the coming weeks.

My department is also aware of the significant impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our education system over the past two years, including its impact on students who were due to take their Leaving Certificate examinations in those years. The systems of Leaving Certificate Calculated Grades and SEC-Accredited Grades which operated for Leaving Certificate 2020 and 2021 respectively were introduced to assist candidates in those years to progress on their journey to further or higher education, to apprenticeships or to the world of work. I expect that the lessons to be learnt from the pandemic will be considered and where appropriate, will assist in informing the redevelopment of Senior Cycle.

### **Special Educational Needs**

133. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education the steps she is taking to address the shortage of special needs assistants for schools (details supplied). [45591/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I understand the Deputy is referring to applications for additional SNA support for the named schools.

The NCSE has responsibility for planning and coordinating school supports for children with special educational needs including the allocation of SNAs and reviews.

The 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 and accordingly your question will be forwarded to the NCSE for direct response.

## **Education Policy**

134. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education the steps she is taking to improve literacy and numeracy within the education system; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45177/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The National Strategy: Literacy & Numeracy for Learning and life 2011-2020 and Interim Review 2017 sets out a clear vision for raising standards of teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy for all learners including those with additional needs in our early years, primary and post-primary schools. The strategy has resulted in reforms in initial teacher education, dedicated support for professional learning

and curriculum reform. The interim review identified areas for particular focus for the remainder of the strategy to include a set of discrete targets for DEIS schools focussed on reducing the literacy and numeracy achievement gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools.

My Department has continued to keep literacy and numeracy as a high priority during the period of 2019-2020. Supports have been put in place to include a series of literacy and Numeracy research reports and resources and an innovative programme Covid Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS) which affords schools the flexibility to implement additional specific educational supports for learners during the current academic year.

My Department's support services PDST and JCT continue to provide a comprehensive suite of supports to teachers in relation to literacy and numeracy with Reading Recovery, Maths Recovery, Languages and Literacy and Numeracy continuing to be part of the priority supports for teachers at both primary and post-primary levels.

Development of a new Literacy and Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy, is underway. The strategy will be informed by robust research to include consideration of national and international practice, stakeholder engagement and public consultation.

### **Pupil-Teacher Ratio**

135. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education her plans to reduce the average class size for primary schools considering the growing population and the extra demands on space due to Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45588/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Under the Programme for Government there is a commitment to seek to make further progress in reducing the pupil teacher ratios in primary 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 classroom teacher for every 25 pupils. This is the lowest pupil teacher ratio ever at primary school.

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. This compares favourably with the OECD pupil teacher ratio which is 1:15. 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 for this school year, and statistics on this will be published later in the year. Enrolments are projected to fall over the coming years before stabilising and rising marginally in the next decade.

Any further improvement will have to be considered in the context of the annual budgetary process.

### **School Staff**

136. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Education the measures and proposals her Department has taken or plans taking to regularise pay, conditions and the pensions of school secretaries; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45451/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School secretaries and caretakers are valued members of our school communities and my Department is fully aware of the vitally important role played by them in the running of our schools.

The Department previously fully implemented and funded the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator for a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim and officials from the Department and school management bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the issues. On the 27th of October 2020, under the auspices of the WRC, an understanding was agreed on a pathway to progress the issues. Several key strands have been identified, and a phased approach is being taken to the development of proposals.

Following intensive discussions at the WRC on 13th September, there has been significant progress in this dispute. Subject to agreement on all elements of the claim, the Department has offered to move School Secretaries' pay rates to a scale which is aligned with the Clerical Officer Grade III pay scale within education and training boards on a pro rata basis with an effective date of implementation for these new pay arrangements of 1st September 2021. Pay rates will be pro rata according to a secretary's current working pattern. The assimilation of School Secretaries to the CO Grade III pay scale will require further dialogue between the parties and an intensive engagement will take place of over the next two/three weeks to allow this to be finalised.

My Department has also offered to improve the conditions for School Secretaries with regard to sick leave, annual leave and maternity provisions for this cohort of staff. This will take place via direct engagement with the unions in the coming weeks in addition to engagement on other elements of the claim and subject to all elements being agreed.

While there is agreement in principle to take the same approach to the consideration of appropriate pay and conditions of grant funded caretakers there remains a deficit of data on working terms and conditions of such staff. When the final package for secretaries has been agreed and an implementation plan in place for schools and DE, that intensive engagement will begin on regularising the pay and conditions of grant funded caretakers.

I welcome the deferral of the action scheduled for Wednesday 15th September to allow for intensive talks to resume aimed at resolving the claim and agreeing a final package and I look forward to further progress being advanced.

### **Pupil-Teacher Ratio**

137. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education her plans to reduce pupil teacher ratios in primary and secondary schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45674/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Under the Programme for Government there is a commitment to seek to make further progress in reducing the pupil teacher ratios in primary schools.

Teacher allocations to all schools are approved annually by my Department in accordance with established rules based on recognised pupil enrolment on the previous 30 September. The criteria for the allocation of posts are communicated to school managements annually and are available on the Department website.

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

At post primary level, teachers are currently allocated at a ratio of 19:1 in the free education system and 23:1 to schools in the fee charging sector. Each 1 point adjustment to the pupil teacher ratio at post primary level would result in an additional 1150 teaching posts at an estimated cost of approx. €56.5m per annum.

As part of COVID-19 operational supports, 1,000 additional teachers have been allocated to post-primary schools to help reduce class sizes. A teacher allocation equivalent to a pupil teacher ratio reduction of 0.6 has been allocated to schools in the free scheme. This allocation supports the important work of teaching and learning and provide additional teachers needed to support teacher substitution, management of physical distancing requirements by reallocating class timetables in schools to smaller groups class sizes where necessary. These posts will also provide for management supports. In addition an allocation, equivalent to a pupil teacher ratio reduction of 0.1 has been provided in respect of Guidance provision to support student wellbeing.

Any further improvement will have to be considered in the context of the annual budgetary process.

### **Disadvantaged Status**

138. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education the supports under the DEIS programme for the 2021-2022 school year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45675/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** DEIS – Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools is the main policy initiative of my Department to address educational disadvantage at school level.

In the 2021/22 academic year there are 884 schools in the DEIS Programme serving over 186,000 pupils - 687 Primary and 197 Post Primary.

The full list of supports available under the DEIS Programme for the 2021/22 school year are available on Gov.ie at the following link [www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4018ea-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/](http://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4018ea-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/)

In addition I recently announced that a COVID Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS) has been put in place for the 2021/22 school year to help all schools mitigate the adverse impacts of Covid-19 on pupil/student learning loss and wellbeing arising from the periods of school closures in 2020 and 2021.

Under the programme, a block of additional teaching hours is being provided to each recognised school, from which schools can provide additional teaching support for the pupils/students who have experienced difficulties in settling back into school and engaging with learning.

The allocations of additional teaching hours are provided on a graduated and proportion-

ate basis, based on school size, using the 2020/21 school enrolments data, as published on the Primary and Post Primary Online Databases (PPOD).

Enhanced allocations are also being provided for special schools and schools participating in the DEIS Programme. Schools may use the additional allocation of teaching hours in accordance with the needs of their students. This will enable schools to identify students most at risk of learning loss arising from the recent disrupted school experience and put in place specific targeted teaching supports to meet these students' needs. The additional hours can be utilized by schools from October of this year, to the end of the 2021/22 school year.

Full detail of the programme is set out in Department circular 045/2021 which is available at [www.gov.ie/en/circular/aec0a-covid-learning-and-support-scheme/](http://www.gov.ie/en/circular/aec0a-covid-learning-and-support-scheme/).

### **School Transport**

139. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education if there is a timeline in place for when the steering group reviewing the school transport scheme will publish its recommendations; if she expects to have these recommendations in place for the 2022-2023 academic year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45217/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The School Transport Scheme is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department. In the 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, were transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who 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.

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 by the end of Q1 in 2022 on the future operation of the Department's School Transport

Scheme.

### **School Transport**

140. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Education the reason parents who are medical card holders have been told that their children are not eligible to travel to a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45626/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the current school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

Under the terms of the Department's Post-Primary School Transport Scheme children are eligible for school transport where they reside not less than 4.8 kilometres from and are attending their nearest school/education centre as determined by my Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who completed the application and payment process on time will be accommodated on school transport services for the 2020/21 school year where such services are in operation.

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

Distance eligibility is determined by Bus Éireann by measuring the shortest traversable route from the child's home to the relevant school and Bus Éireann has confirmed that this may affect eligibility for certain families in the area referred to by the Deputy. If the Deputy has queries in regard to a specific family or families School Transport will advise on an individual basis.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

141. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which she remains satisfied that children and teachers are safely and adequately protected from Covid-19 throughout the autumn and winter months; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45600/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department has always been guided by Public Health in relation to appropriate Covid-19 infection prevention and control measures that have been put in place in schools to operate safely and prevent the introduction of Covid-19 and also the onward transmission of Covid-19 among the school community. These measures protect pupils/students, their parents and school staff and are very effective when adhered to.

My Department wrote to all schools in August providing details of the arrangements that are in place for this school year. These arrangements included the provision of CO2 monitors to as-

sist schools with managing ventilation. Significant additional resources of €639m were put into schools in the last academic year to keep schools safe. These resources provided for additional principal release days for primary principals and deputy principals, expansion of teacher supply panels to provide for additional substitute requirements and additional teaching posts at post primary level to facilitate physical distancing measures in line with public health advice and these measures are remaining in place for this school year.

Each school is also required to have a COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe operation through the prevention, early detection and control of COVID-19 in line with public health advice. This guidance is focused on the practical steps schools must take to minimise the risk of transmission of infection, including physical distancing measures and reducing the risk of congregation of students. It is a matter for each individual school to implement these measures locally taking into account its individual circumstances such as school layout.

The infection prevention and control measures in place in schools have worked very effectively to prevent and control Covid-19 in schools. The Department will continue to work closely with public health officials and the education stakeholders in respect of the safe operation of schools during Covid-19.

### **School Curriculum**

142. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the status of legislation to ensure an inclusive, relevant and age-appropriate sexual education programme for students following announcements made by her in May 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45720/21]

169. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education when legislation will be brought forward to provide adequate, relevant and age-appropriate sexual education throughout Irish schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45721/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 142 and 169 together.

Access to sexual and health education is an important right for students. Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is a mandatory curriculum subject in all primary schools and in post-primary Junior Cycle. Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is required at all levels, from primary through to Senior Cycle.

All schools are required to have an RSE policy that is developed in consultation with the school community, including school management, parents, teachers and students as appropriate. The school's programme for Relationship and Sexuality Education is developed and taught in the context of the school's RSE policy. Schools are required to teach all aspects of the RSE programme, including family planning and sexual orientation. It is important to note that the ethos of the school should never preclude learners from acquiring the knowledge about the issues, but ethos may influence how that content is treated.

My Department continues to work closely with the NCCA to best give effect to the commitment in the Programme for Government to develop inclusive and age-appropriate RSE and SPHE curricula across primary and post-primary levels, including an inclusive programme on LGBTI+ relationships. The work of the NCCA draws on its report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education in primary and post-primary schools, which was published in December 2019. Arising from recommendations in that report the NCCA has been publishing online learning resources to support teaching and learning linked to the current SPHE/RSE

curriculum in schools. The resources in this online toolkit include guidance on how to create a more inclusive classroom. As well as these updated online learning resources the NCCA has recently began work on draft Junior Cycle SPHE specifications, with a draft of the updated specification planned to be available for consultation in early 2022. This will be followed by the redevelopment of the Senior Cycle and Primary curricula.

My Department continues to work closely with the NCCA to determine the approach to best give effect to the commitment regarding SPHE and RSE in the Programme for Government. Should any legislative changes be required in this context I am committed to making such changes.

### **Disadvantaged Status**

143. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education the status of the DEIS review and plans to extend the DEIS programme to schools (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45668/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** A key part of the DEIS Plan was the introduction of a new DEIS identification process based on an objective, statistics based model. In terms of the further extension of the DEIS Programme to more schools, an extensive body of work is being undertaken in terms of the refinement of this model, including data analysis and consultation with education partners.

Once the work on the refined DEIS ID model has been completed, all schools will be considered under this new refined model, including the school referred to by the Deputy.

Until then, it is not intended to extend the DEIS programme to any further schools.

### **Disadvantaged Status**

144. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Education if additional supports will be made available to DEIS schools to assist them in the coming academic year following a prior year in which a significant amount of learning was done either remotely or through home-schooling; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45573/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** DEIS – Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools is the main policy initiative of my Department to address educational disadvantage at school level.

In the 2021/22 academic year there are 884 schools in the DEIS Programme serving over 186,000 pupils - 687 Primary and 197 Post Primary.

My Department will spend over €150 million on the DEIS Programme in 2021, which includes some €26.07 million for the School Completion Programme.

The full list of supports available under the DEIS Programme for the 2021/22 school year is available on Gov.ie at the following link [www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4018ea-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/](http://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4018ea-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/)

I recently announced that a COVID Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS) has been put in place for the 2021/22 school year to help all schools mitigate the adverse impacts of Covid-19 on pupil/student learning loss and wellbeing arising from the periods of school closures in 2020

and 2021.

Under the programme, a block of additional teaching hours is being provided to each recognised school, from which schools can provide additional teaching support for the pupils/students who have experienced difficulties in settling back into school and engaging with learning.

The allocations of additional teaching hours are provided on a graduated and proportionate basis, based on school size, using the 2020/21 school enrolments data, as published on the Primary (POD) and Post Primary Online Databases (PPOD).

Enhanced allocations are also being provided for special schools and schools participating in the DEIS Programme. Schools may use the additional allocation of teaching hours in accordance with the needs of their students. This will enable schools to identify students most at risk of learning loss arising from the recent disrupted school experience and put in place specific targeted teaching supports to meet these students' needs. The additional hours can be utilized by schools from October of this year, to the end of the 2021/22 school year.

Full detail of the programme is set out in Department circular 045/2021 which is available at [www.gov.ie/en/circular/aec0a-covid-learning-and-support-scheme/](http://www.gov.ie/en/circular/aec0a-covid-learning-and-support-scheme/).

### **Departmental Schemes**

145. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education the status of the schools energy retrofit pathfinder programme including the planned measures; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45673/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department and the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications established a jointly funded pathfinder programme with the SEAI, testing and demonstrating energy efficiency and decarbonisation retrofit approaches. This pathfinder is a great example of collaboration ensuring the deployment of new design approaches and technologies are introduced to the educational environment on an evidence based approach.

This Pathfinder programme is paving the way for, and informing, a much larger national schools' programme for the energy retrofit of schools built prior to 2008 as included in the National Development Plan. It is facilitating research on a range of typical retrofit options, which will have been tried and tested. It is providing valuable development information for a solution driven delivery strategy which will be founded on a solid evidence base that has proven the robustness and scalability of renewable solutions within the schools' sector.

Now in its fifth year, the pilot programme has completed retrofits in 39 schools across Ireland to date. This year sees six schools undergoing deep retrofit to a Building Energy Rating (BER) of B with renewable heating systems. Each school underwent a comprehensive assessment to ensure that the measures were suitable for that school and would deliver value to both the school and learnings for the national retrofit programme. The schools for the 2021 programme include:

- Coláiste Iósaef Community College, Kilmallock, Co. Limerick
- Cornafulla National School, Athlone, Co. Roscommon
- St. Laserian's Special School, Carlow, Co. Carlow
- St. Mary's Boys National School, Monaghan, Co. Monaghan

- St. Columba's Comprehensive School, Glenties, Co. Donegal

- Maryfield College, Grace Park, Dublin 9

- The upgrades target a Building Energy Rating of B, 50% energy efficiency improvement and 50% emission reduction. The works will involve upgrades to doors and windows, insulation, lighting and heating upgrades as well as renewable technologies.

The Government's Climate Action Plan will outline how energy efficiency and greenhouse gas emissions targets are to be achieved and is due to be published this year.

### **Special Educational Needs**

146. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Education her progress to date in engaging with local schools to provide additional ASD classes at both primary and post-primary level in Dublin 9 and 11; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45450/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education is a priority for this Government.

The level of investment in special education, at almost €2 billion, is at an all-time high.

An additional 269 special classes are being opened this school-year. This will bring the total number of special classes nationally to 2,118. The new classes provide 1,600 additional places, spread right throughout the country.

Two new special schools are also opening this year, one in Dublin and one in Cork.

Despite this unprecedented increase, I am very aware of the need for further specialist education places in a small number of areas, mainly concentrated in Dublin.

Currently, there are nineteen special classes for students with autism attached to mainstream primary and post-primary schools in Dublin 9 and 11, four of which opened this September. This also includes an Early Intervention class, providing placements for students in the area.

I acknowledge that any delay in securing a suitable school placement can cause much anguish for parents and families involved.

Delays can happen for a variety of reasons including, for example, assessment reports for children becoming available over the summer period while schools were closed. In other cases, parents may change their preference for a class placement and request that their child move from a mainstream class to a special class.

My Department and the NCSE have therefore put in place new planning structures and procedures to ensure sufficient places become available to meet local need. As new need emerges, there is a cohesive response available to ensure places become available in a timely and targeted way.

The willingness of school communities to open special classes is central to ensuring that every child can obtain a suitable placement. My Department and the NCSE can provide the necessary funding, teaching and SNA resources, professional supports and training so that the required special class places can be provided as soon as possible.

Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) are working closely with parents and

schools to address the needs of the Dublin 9 and 11 areas. My Department will support their work in any way necessary to ensure the required number of school places become available as quickly as possible.

### **School Textbooks**

147. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if she will provide clear and uniform guidance to schools on the use of lockers for students to store books during the school day. [45693/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Department guidance to schools in relation to infection prevention and control measures does not restrict the use of lockers by schools. Each school is required to have a COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe operation through the prevention, early detection and control of COVID-19 in line with public health advice. This guidance is focused on the practical steps schools must take to minimise the risk of transmission of infection, including physical distancing measures and reducing the risk of congregation of students, in public areas where lockers are usually located.

It is a matter for each individual school to implement these measures locally taking into account its individual circumstances such as school layout.

### **Special Educational Needs**

148. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to significant delays in the opening of a new special school in Carrigaline, County Cork, an appeal from the school due to understaffing and the fact that the school is now being forced to open without full completion of the outside garden and play areas. [45596/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The conversion of the Carrigaline Gaelscoil primary school building to a dedicated Special School involved significant construction and building renovation works. This work was undertaken during the months of July and August following the vacation of the Gaelscoil for the summer recess on June 25th 2021. The internal works were prioritised to ensure the school building was upgraded to create an environment suitable for the pupil's physical, educational and sensory needs. These works have been successfully completed and the building is now available to the school community.

Similarly the external environment is specially designed to meet the needs of pupils. Due to unforeseen issues with availability of play equipment and materials, the external play areas are scheduled for completion in the last week of October. Every effort is being made to improve upon this date.

The staffing which has already been sanctioned by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) for Carrigaline Community Special School has been recruited and currently comprises an Administrative Principal, 6 mainstream teachers and 11 Special Needs Assistants (SNAs). NCSE is working closely with the school to ensure that students are supported in their transition to the new school in accordance with their needs.

The enrolment for the 2021/22 school year is 32 students. The school will expand to 48 students over time and the staffing allocation will increase in line with the increased enrolment and in accordance with the students' needs.

I can assure the Deputy that my Department and the NCSE will continue to work with the

school authorities to ensure that it is fully operational as soon as possible.

### **State Examinations**

149. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education the progress that is being made in reviewing the current leaving certificate cycle; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45583/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Between 2016 and 2020, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) undertook an extensive review of senior cycle programmes and vocational pathways, to include Transition Year, the Leaving Certificate Applied, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Established.

The review involved a very broad range of research, consultations and communications with a wide range of stakeholders, on all aspects of review and redevelopment over a number of phases over the period of the review. The NCCA also commissioned external expertise to support the process, including the ESRI and the OECD.

The Advisory Report, maps out, in broad terms, an ambitious programme of work, which would enable the development and construction of the components that would make up a Framework for Senior Cycle and will involve further ongoing stakeholder engagement and consultation.

The NCCA's *Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report* has been submitted to my Department for consideration and will be published in the coming weeks.

My department is also aware of the significant impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our education system over the past two years, including its impact on students who were due to take their Leaving Certificate examinations in those years. The systems of Leaving Certificate Calculated Grades and SEC-Accredited Grades which operated for Leaving Certificate 2020 and 2021 respectively were introduced to assist candidates in those years to progress on their journey to further or higher education, to apprenticeships or to the world of work. I expect that the lessons to be learnt from the pandemic will be considered and where appropriate, will assist in informing the redevelopment of Senior Cycle.

### **Schools Building Projects**

150. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Education the progress made on the new building for a school (details supplied); and the estimated timeline for works. [45184/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The brief for the project referred to by the Deputy is to provide a new replacement school building designed for special needs pupils on a green field site. The project will deliver a single storey building, providing an 8 classroom special school and appropriate ancillary accommodation including a General Purpose room, a Home Economics Room, a Daily Living Skills room, library and resource area.

The major building project referred to by the Deputy has been authorised to progress to Stage 2b – Detailed Design which includes applications for all statutory consents, including Planning Permission, Disability Access Certificate and Fire Safety Certificate and also the preparation of tender documentation. The Planning Permission Application was received by the Local Authority on June 1st 2021. The Planning Authority has sought further information and the Design Team are finalising design proposals to deal with comments in the additional infor-

mation request and hope to issue a response by the end of September.

Until the final grant of statutory applications has been received from the local authority, and the Stage 2(b) submission has been received by my Department for review, it is not possible to give a definitive timeline with regard to an expected on site date.

This major building project is included in my Department's Construction Programme which is being delivered under the National Development Plan.

### **Site Acquisitions**

151. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education the engagement to date with a school (details supplied) in progressing a new building and site identification; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45582/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department is liaising with the school in question relating to a proposed site visit. Indicative dates have been proposed and my Department expects to be in a position to confirm a date to the school shortly.

In the meantime, my Department approved four additional temporary classrooms for the school and I understand that they are in the process of being constructed on site.

### **Schools Building Projects**

152. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education if funding will be allocated for the construction of a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45235/21]

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

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

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

New schools are established in response to demographic demand as identified through such analysis and a patronage process is then conducted, which takes into account parental preferences in relation to the patronage and language of instruction, i.e. Irish or English, of the new school. Parental preferences, as well as other considerations such as the extent of diversity of provision in an area (including Irish-medium provision), are key to the decision-making process and in relation to whether the new school would take the form of an Irish-medium Gaelcholáiste or whether, if English-medium, the school would include an Irish-medium unit or "Aonad".

The most recent projections for the Swords school planning area does not indicate a requirement for the establishment of a new post-primary school.

### **School Transport**

153. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education if she will reform the school transport scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45501/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The School Transport Scheme is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department. In the 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, were transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who 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.

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 Curriculum**

154. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education the status of the review of the senior cycle; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45670/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Between 2016 and 2020, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) undertook an extensive review of senior cycle programmes and vocational pathways, to include Transition Year, the Leaving Certificate Applied, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Established.

The review involved a very broad range of research, consultations and communications with a wide range of stakeholders, on all aspects of review and redevelopment over a number of phases over the period of the review. The NCCA also commissioned external expertise to support the process, including the ESRI and the OECD.

The Advisory Report, maps out, in broad terms, an ambitious programme of work, which would enable the development and construction of the components that would make up a Framework for Senior Cycle and will involve further ongoing stakeholder engagement and consultation.

The NCCA's *Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report* has been submitted to my Department for consideration and will be published in the coming weeks.

My department is also aware of the significant impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our education system over the past two years, including its impact on students who were due to take their Leaving Certificate examinations in those years. The systems of Leaving Certificate Calculated Grades and SEC-Accredited Grades which operated for Leaving Certificate 2020 and 2021 respectively were introduced to assist candidates in those years to progress on their journey to further or higher education, to apprenticeships or to the world of work. I expect that the lessons to be learnt from the pandemic will be considered and where appropriate, will assist in informing the redevelopment of Senior Cycle.

### **School Textbooks**

155. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Education the status of the work being carried out to reduce the use of workbooks in schools and encourage greater reuse or rental of schoolbooks; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45432/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department provides a book grant to all recognised primary and post primary schools within the Free Education Scheme in order to provide assistance for books including Book Rental Schemes. Under this scheme, the Department provided funding of €17.2 million in 2021 to all of these schools.

School book rental schemes have an important role to play in reducing the cost of school books for parents and in order to support the establishment of book rental schemes my Department provided €15.7 million seed capital in 2014, 2015 and 2016 to primary schools. Circa. 96% of primary schools and 69% of post-primary schools operate a book rental scheme.

It is a matter for the Board of Management of each individual school to decide on its own policy in relation to the use of book grant funding in the school but they are expected to adopt a cost-conscious approach to the selection of books for use in their classes. The current arrangement relies on the local knowledge of the school in order to ensure a fair allocation of funds to those most in need.

Additional funding of €1million provided under Budget 2020 was allocated to 102 Primary DEIS schools for a new pilot programme for the 2020/21 school year. I have recently secured funding to continue this for the 2021/22 school year.

The aim of this pilot is to provide free school books for students in the schools involved, and to support these schools in eliminating the cost of school books for parents. It will continue to run for the 2021/22 school year and it's effectiveness and impact will be monitored and evaluated before any decision is made as regards its possible extension or continuation. Under Circular 46/2013, DEIS schools receive a book grant of €21 per student. This pilot provided an

additional €64 per student to increase the overall book grant rate to €85 per student enrolled in the school. This additional funding has issued to schools.

My Department does not hold information in relation to the cost of school books but an indicative estimate of providing free primary and secondary school books to all pupils across all fully publicly funded schools based on a survey by Barnardos is €40m.

The Department is also continuing to progress the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill through the Houses of the Oireachtas. The Bill has been passed by the Seanad and last July passed second stage in the Dáil. The overall aim of the Bill is to improve the level of engagement between the school community by inviting feedback, comment and observation from students and parents and by further developing a listening culture in schools. One of the key concepts of the Bill is the need for a school to consult with the school community on individual school plans, policies and activities.

This approach will help ensure that the various views of staff, students and parents will be heard and responded to by schools on policies and issues including back to school costs. The Bill also provides for schools to provide financial information to students and parents, including information regarding voluntary contributions and how they are spent.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

156. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the steps she is taking to provide CO2 monitors to every classroom to ensure adequate ventilation. [45692/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Managing ventilation is just one of a suite of public health measures in place to keep our schools safe. Updated guidance for schools on Practical Steps for the Deployment of Good Ventilation Practices in Schools was provided at the end of May following the work of an expert group that carefully considered the role of ventilation in managing COVID-19.

A copy of the guidance is published on the Gov.ie website.

The over-arching approach in the guidance is for schools to have windows open as fully as possible when classrooms are not in use and partially open when classrooms are in use.

The guidance outlines that Carbon Dioxide (CO2) monitors can play a part in providing a useful general indication that areas/rooms may not be adequately ventilated. They can enable occupants to become familiar with the impacts of activities, outdoor weather and window openings on levels of good ventilation.

My Department procured portable monitors that are currently being distributed to schools – between 2 and 20 at primary school level and between 20 and 35 at post-primary school level depending on school size, at an estimated overall cost of €4 million. The monitors are portable, simple to use, and will give a digital reading.

Deliveries of CO2 monitors to schools commenced in the third week of August. In total, it involves over 35,000 CO2 monitors being distributed to, primary and post-primary schools. 25,000 CO2 monitors have been distributed to schools which has facilitated monitors being provided to each school.

96% of primary schools (including all special schools) having received their full allocation of CO2. Ten CO2 monitors have been provided to schools at post-primary level with the bal-

ance of their allocation expected to be distributed in October.

### **Mental Health Services**

157. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Education the current and planned mental health supports in place for primary and secondary students; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45665/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department's approach to supporting wellbeing and mental health is set out in its Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice first published in 2018 and refreshed in 2019. The approach proposed is a whole school and preventative approach which has multiple components that include providing children and young people with opportunities to:

- build core social and emotional skills and competencies
- experience supportive relationships within the school setting
- be part of a school environment and culture that feels both physically and psychologically safe, in which they feel a sense of belonging and connectedness, that their voice is heard, and they feel supported

Schools are encouraged to use a reflective, school self-evaluation approach to identify and prioritise the needs of its own school community in relation to the promotion of wellbeing and mental health, and to respond to meeting those needs.

Embedded in the whole-school approach is the recognition that members of the school community may have different needs at different times and that a continuum of support in relation to wellbeing should be made available.

A broad range of supports, resources and professional learning opportunities are being provided to support schools to promote and support wellbeing and resilience by the Department's support services. The services support schools to provide strong universal support at the level of whole school and classroom, more targeted support for some children and young people who may be at risk, and more individualised support for those with greatest need. Support is provided to primary and post-primary school staff through the following services and supports:

- The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)
- Guidance Counselling service/provision
- National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
- Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) Wellbeing Team
- Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) Support Service
- Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI)

My Department's National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) provides a school-based, consultative, psychological service through the provision of an individual casework service for students and a support and development service for school staff.

The NEPS casework service involves the provision of a psychological service for a student, with the psychologist working with the student, teachers and parents, and other professionals

if appropriate, to identify need and plan for intervention and review to support the student in school. This service can take place over an extended period of time with NEPS psychologists. This model does not operate on a waiting list basis, and extends to approximately 8000 students per annum.

The NEPS Support and Development service, reaching an estimated 25,000 teachers annually, is an applied psychological service for school staff to help build their capability to respond to the wellbeing, academic, social and emotional needs of all students, and particularly those who are experiencing barriers to their wellbeing, learning, inclusion and participation. Professional learning activities to support children/young people with social/emotional/mental health difficulties and to promote positive wellbeing in school include:

- **FRIENDS:** Training teachers in the delivery of the FRIENDS programmes ('Fun Friends', 'Friends for Life' and 'My Friends Youth'), which are evidence-based anxiety prevention and resilience building programmes, which foster self-concept and a sense of school belonging using Cognitive Behavioural Therapeutically-informed approaches. Friends programmes help students to develop resilience by teaching them effective strategies to cope with, problem solve and manage all kinds of emotional distress, including worry, stress, change and anxiety. Since Covid-19 the training has been adapted to Webinar format which increases accessibility for teachers. The webinar delivery will be scaled up next year to deliver the programmes nationally to interested schools.

- **INCREDIBLE YEARS:** The Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management programme is a six-day, evidence-based programme that equips teachers to manage their classrooms effectively to prevent and reduce behavioural problems while promoting children's wellbeing and emotional and social competence.

- NEPS is currently developing a range of workshops on the promotion of wellbeing and resilience in schools which include upskilling school staff on the use and implementation of therapeutically-informed approaches in schools. These include trauma-informed approaches, approaches based on the principles of cognitive behaviour therapy, and attachment-aware approaches. The approaches outlined in the workshops are based on research findings, on the experience of experts in their fields and on the experience of practising psychologists working in schools. The workshops will be available to build the capability of school staff in both primary and post-primary settings, including for school leaders, teachers and SNAs. Following a pilot of the workshops undertaken in the summer term (2021) with a mixture of DEIS, non-DEIS and urban and rural schools, the national roll-out of these workshops and webinars is planned for the next academic year.

At post primary level, a Student Support Team is a student-focused mechanism put in place by a school in order to co-ordinate the support available for students in the school and to facilitate links to the community and other non-school support services. NEPS provides support to post primary schools in the setting up or review of Student Support Teams.

Also at post primary level, counselling is a key part of the role of the Guidance Counsellor, offered on an individual or group basis as part of a developmental learning process, at moments of personal crisis but also at key transition points. Guidance allocations for all schools were increased in the 2020/21 school year. The Guidance Counsellor also identifies and supports the referral of students to external counselling agencies and professionals, as required. Each post primary school currently receives an allocation in respect of guidance provision, calculated by reference to the approved enrolment. The total number of guidance counsellor posts in the school year 2020/21 is 852.

Separately, the Department of Health has responsibility for the provision of counselling ser-

vices in Ireland, and through HSE Primary Care Psychology and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) provides clinical support to children and young people with mental health needs.

In addition, the HSE and its funded providers, provide e-mental health services that offer online text and telephone supports to people seeking mental health information and advice.

These include services provided by the Samaritans, Pieta House, MyMind, Turn2Me, Aware, Crisis Text Ireland, Shine, BeLongTo, LGBT Ireland, Jigsaw, spunout, Bodywhys and Childline.

My Department – through NEPS, Student Support Teams, Guidance Counsellors and other services - will continue to signpost schools and students to the HSE/HSE-funded e-mental health services.

My Department has built strong links with the Department of Health and both Departments are exploring ways to improve supports for young people, including around increased awareness, promoting help-seeking behaviour and sign-posting to the wide range of available services. We will continue to collectively explore ways of improving supports for children and young people.

*Question No. 158 answered with Question No. 127.*

### **Capitation Grants**

159. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Education her plans to increase capitation grants in order that each school has the staff and resources they need to deliver for all of their students; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45666/21]

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

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

All schools have received the benefit of the capitation increases awarded to date. It is my intention to seek funding for further capitation increases in future budgets. However I must be prudent in the context of ongoing budgetary pressures given the current economic circumstances.

*Question No. 160 answered with Question No. 113.*

### **Public Sector Pay**

161. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Education if she has considered the reintroduction of an allowance for teachers on offshore islands; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45648/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** In 2012 a public service-wide review of

all allowances was carried out by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and as a result certain allowances were abolished with effect from 1st February 2012. My Department issued Circular 0008/2013 which outlines the effect of this review on teachers. In common with a number of job-role based allowances, sanction for payment to new beneficiaries of the Gaeltacht allowance was withdrawn from 1st February 2012 under the terms of the Circular. Furthermore, if a teacher was eligible for receipt of the allowance prior to 1st February 2012 and subsequently left that job role on or after 1st February 2012 on a voluntary basis, their entitlement to the allowance ceases from the date of the move and they cannot re-gain entitlement.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

162. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education the consideration given and the action she has taken to provide high-efficiency particulate absorbing filters for each classroom, learning room and staffroom. [45678/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Updated guidance for schools on Practical Steps for the Deployment of Good Ventilation Practices in Schools was provided at the end of May following the work of an expert group that carefully considered the role of ventilation in managing COVID-19.

A copy of the guidance is published on the Gov.ie website.

The over-arching approach in the Department's ventilation guidance for schools is to have windows open as fully as possible when classrooms are not in use and partially open when classrooms are in use. The practical steps and stepwise approach set out in the guidance are sufficient to ensure good ventilation practices in school while at the same time ensuring an appropriate balance between ventilation and comfort.

As part of following through on the updated guidance, the Department has procured CO2 monitors from a central framework and a supply of these are being distributed directly to schools which will assist them in managing their ventilation strategy. 25,000 monitors have been delivered to date with 96% of primary schools (including all special schools) having received their full allocation of CO2. Ten CO2 monitors have been provided to schools at post-primary level with the balance of their allocation expected to be distributed in October.

The Departments guidance also sets out the role Air cleaners can play in our schools but it is important to note that they do not remove CO2 and are not a substitute for good ventilation.

The requirement for air cleaners in schools will depend on advices provided to schools by their Architect/Engineer. However, as part of contingency planning, the Department has put arrangements in place for a small reserve of air cleaners to facilitate quick deployment to any primary or post-primary school which has an immediate need and has been unsuccessful in sourcing locally.

### **Schools Building Projects**

163. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Education the status of the delivery of large-scale building projects in County Mayo; the applications that are currently being considered under the school building programme in the county; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45642/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The current NDP, as part of Project Ire-

land 2040 framework, provides for €8.8bn investment in schools during the period 2018 to 2027.

During the NDP period 2018-2020, there were **526 completed building projects** under the Large Scale Capital Programme (LSCP) and the Additional School Accommodation Scheme (ASA). These projects delivered in excess of **48,000 school places**, including permanent accommodation for **229 special classes**; and additional capacity for **67 classrooms in 14 special schools** throughout the country.

Of the **526** school building projects completed in 2018-2020, **19** of these projects delivered were in County Mayo.

From 2018 to date, there has been almost €60m in capital funding (including Minor Works Grants) issued from my Department in respect of school capital grants and school building projects in Co. Mayo. €14.7m during 2021 to date and a further €45.3m across 2018, 2019 and 2020.

The Department has a significant existing pipeline of projects to be delivered over the coming years to meet capacity needs managed under the Large Scale Capital Programme and the Additional School Accommodation Scheme. Overall there are 63 projects that are in County Mayo at various stages of planning, design and in construction. 6 of these projects are on the Large Scale Capital Programme and a further 57 projects on the Additional School Accommodation Scheme.

There are also 5 applications currently being assessed by officials under the Additional School Accommodation Scheme and a decision will be conveyed directly to the school when this process has been completed.

The current status of these projects being delivered is listed on a county by county basis on the [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie) and is updated on a monthly basis to reflect their progress through the various stages.

### **State Examinations**

164. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Education the criteria used by the State Examination Board when marking down accredited grades which students were allocated by their teachers in leaving certificate 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45505/21]

**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.

### **Site Acquisitions**

165. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Education the status of a project (details supplied); if further progress has been made on the site acquisition; if her attention has been drawn to obstacles to progressing the project within normal Departmental timeframes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45529/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** As the Deputy is aware, agreement in principle has been reached to acquire a site for the permanent location of the school in question. The location of the permanent site will incorporate the current temporary site at Mill Road, Drogheda at which the school is currently located. Officials in my Department are working together to manage the site acquisition, interim accommodation and the development of the permanent school building in consultation with the landowner and Council officials to develop the required school facilities as expeditiously as possible.

I can confirm that the school building project has moved to the delivery stage and a pre planning meeting has taken place with the Local Authority in relation to the planned development of the school site for both the interim and permanent accommodation. Once statutory approvals have been secured, the project will proceed to tender and construction stages.

The site acquisition process is complex and subject to completion of successful negotiation and conveyancing processes. Therefore, given the complexities involved it is not possible to give a definitive timeframe for the completion of the acquisition but my officials will endeavour to bring the process to a conclusion as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

166. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education the consideration given and action she has taken to protect and improve air quality in classrooms and school staffrooms. [45681/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Managing ventilation is just one of a suite of public health measures in place to keep our schools safe. Updated guidance for schools on Practical Steps for the Deployment of Good Ventilation Practices in Schools was provided at the end of May following the work of an expert group that carefully considered the role of ventilation in managing COVID-19.

A copy of the guidance is published on the Gov.ie website.

The over-arching approach in the guidance is for schools to have windows open as fully as possible when classrooms are not in use and partially open when classrooms are in use.

The guidance outlines that Carbon Dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) monitors can play a part in providing a useful general indication that areas/rooms may not be adequately ventilated. They can enable occupants to become familiar with the impacts of activities, outdoor weather and window openings on levels of good ventilation.

My Department procured portable monitors that are currently being distributed to schools – between 2 and 20 at primary school level and between 20 and 35 at post-primary school level depending on school size, at an estimated overall cost of €4 million. The monitors are portable, simple to use, and will give a digital reading.

Deliveries of CO<sub>2</sub> monitors to schools commenced in the third week of August. In total, it involves over 35,000 CO<sub>2</sub> monitors being distributed to, primary and post-primary schools. 25,000 CO<sub>2</sub> monitors have been distributed to schools which has facilitated monitors being provided to each school.

96% of primary schools (including all special schools) having received their full allocation of CO<sub>2</sub>. Ten CO<sub>2</sub> monitors have been provided to schools at post-primary level with the balance of their allocation expected to be distributed in October.

## **School Accommodation**

167. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education the way her Department plans to upgrade classroom accommodation including addressing defective walls in a school (details supplied). [45578/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm to the Deputy that the school referred to has been approved for a project under my Department's Additional Accommodation Scheme 2021. This project will provide for a two classroom SEN base and has been devolved for delivery to the school authority.

This project was approved in March 2021 and is in the early design stage.

I can advise the Deputy that the school has also been approved funding under my Department's Emergency Works Scheme to address the issues with the fabric of the building in question.

## **School Staff**

168. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the steps she has taken to achieve pay equality and pension entitlements for school caretakers. [45690/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School secretaries and caretakers are valued members of our school communities and my Department is fully aware of the vitally important role played by them in the running of our schools.

The Department previously fully implemented and funded the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator for a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim and officials from the Department and school management bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the issues. On the 27th of October 2020, under the auspices of the WRC, an understanding was agreed on a pathway to progress the issues. Several key strands have been identified, and a phased approach is being taken to the development of proposals.

Following intensive discussions at the WRC on 13th September, there has been significant progress in this dispute. Subject to agreement on all elements of the claim, the Department has offered to move School Secretaries' pay rates to a scale which is aligned with the Clerical Officer Grade III pay scale within education and training boards on a pro rata basis with an effective date of implementation for these new pay arrangements of 1st September 2021. Pay rates will be pro rata according to a secretary's current working pattern. The assimilation of School Secretaries to the CO Grade III pay scale will require further dialogue between the parties and an intensive engagement will take place over the next two/three weeks to allow this to be finalised.

My Department has also offered to improve the conditions for School Secretaries with regard to sick leave, annual leave and maternity provisions for this cohort of staff. This will take place via direct engagement with the unions in the coming weeks in addition to engagement on other elements of the claim and subject to all elements being agreed.

While there is agreement in principle to take the same approach to the consideration of appropriate pay and conditions of grant funded caretakers there remains a deficit of data on work-

ing terms and conditions of such staff. When the final package for secretaries has been agreed and an implementation plan in place for schools and DE, that intensive engagement will begin on regularising the pay and conditions of grant funded caretakers.

I welcome the deferral of the action scheduled for Wednesday 15th September to allow for intensive talks to resume aimed at resolving the claim and agreeing a final package and I look forward to further progress being advanced.

*Question No. 169 answered with Question No. 142.*

## **Budget 2022**

170. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education the value to date of requests for expenditure increases in her Department's budget allocation for 2022 in pre-budget submissions; the main areas for which allocations have been sought; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [44809/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department has, in advance of the Budget, received pre-budget submissions from a number stakeholders in the education sector and from organisations involved in other areas of public policy. As in previous years, relevant submissions continue to be reviewed and they will inform the specific budgetary priorities that I will be seeking to achieve in Budget 2022.

These pre-budget submissions generally address specific policy matters relevant to the organisation concerned and while they may include some costings it is not the practice of my Department to attempt to cost or validate the entirety of the proposals contained in all such submissions.

## **School Admissions**

171. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education if she will address secondary school place shortages in Milltown, County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45696/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department is aware of increasing pressures and demand for additional school places in a number of school planning areas.

Where capacity issues arise it may not be as a result of lack of accommodation but may be driven by the following factors:

- Duplication of applications – pupils have applied for a place to a number of schools in the area

- School of choice – pupils can't get a place in their preferred school while there are places in other schools in the town/area

- Some towns/areas have single sex schools and while places are available in the school, they are not available to all pupils

- External draw – pupils coming from outside the local area

The true extent of any capacity issue will only become known following discussion with the

relevant school authorities.

Similar to the process adopted in advance of the current academic year, my Department is engaging with patron bodies, including patrons of schools in the mid-Kerry area, to identify particular capacity requirements for the forthcoming year(s) which may necessitate action including, where required, the provision of modular accommodation solutions.

### State Examinations

172. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education if she has received proposals from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment on reform of the leaving certificate; if the experience of the assessment of students during the Covid-19 pandemic will allow more radical revisions than originally anticipated be made; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [44810/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Between 2016 and 2020, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) undertook an extensive review of senior cycle programmes and vocational pathways, to include Transition Year, the Leaving Certificate Applied, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Established.

The review involved a very broad range of research, consultations and communications with a wide range of stakeholders, on all aspects of review and redevelopment over a number of phases over the period of the review. The NCCA also commissioned external expertise to support the process, including the ESRI and the OECD.

The Advisory Report, maps out, in broad terms, an ambitious programme of work, which would enable the development and construction of the components that would make up a Framework for Senior Cycle and will involve further ongoing stakeholder engagement and consultation.

The NCCA's *Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report* has been submitted to my Department for consideration and will be published in the coming weeks.

My department is also aware of the significant impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our education system over the past two years, including its impact on students who were due to take their Leaving Certificate examinations in those years. The systems of Leaving Certificate Calculated Grades and SEC-Accredited Grades which operated for Leaving Certificate 2020 and 2021 respectively were introduced to assist candidates in those years to progress on their journey to further or higher education, to apprenticeships or to the world of work. I expect that the lessons to be learnt from the pandemic will be considered and where appropriate, will assist in informing the redevelopment of Senior Cycle.

### School Transport

173. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if school transport is running at 100% capacity; the steps she is taking to increase the number of seats available on school buses; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45691/21]

**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.

Planning for school transport for the 2021/22 school year has proceeded on the basis that the public health measures in place as schools closed at the end of the last school year would remain as term began in this new school year. This includes the recommendations from Public Health that post-primary services would operate at 50% capacity and that masks would be worn. All other measures relating to hygiene, pre-assigned seating, cleaning and the wearing of masks by post-primary students are also in place. However, as the vaccination programme for children on post-primary services is rolled out and as the lifting of restrictions on public transport services proceeds, the capacity limit of 50% on post-primary school transport services will be subject to ongoing review and the Department will be considering the position in this regard over the coming weeks.

Bus Éireann has confirmed that to date 104,324 pupils, including 54,728 post primary eligible pupils and 14,735 post primary concessionary pupils have been issued tickets for the School Transport Scheme. This number is changing as tickets continue to be allocated to pupils.

Should post-primary services resume operating at 100% capacity and where additional vehicles that were provided for social distancing purposes are removed, any spare capacity available will be offered on those services to concessionary pupils or late applicants where such capacity exists.

*Question No. 174 answered with Question No. 113.*

### **Covid-19 Tests**

175. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education the number of Covid-19 tests administered and the number and proportion of confirmed Covid-19 cases for primary school pupils by week since the return of primary schools in August 2021. [45679/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The most recent weekly schools testing report outlines that from 29 August 2021 to 11 September 2021, 1,261 close contacts within primary schools have been identified and sent for testing and the positivity rate from these test is 58 cases or 4.39%.

This is a very reassuring indicator that transmission in school settings remains at a low level and compares very favourably with community transmission close contact positivity rates, and reflects that infection prevention and control measures are effective in schools.

*Questions - Written Answers*  
**Special Educational Needs**

176. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to a school (details supplied) that has lodged an appeal regarding the inadequate support being supplied for children with very high needs; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45506/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The Special Education Teaching allocation provides a single unified allocation for special educational support teaching needs to each school, based on each school's educational profile.

Under the allocation model, schools have been provided with a total allocation for special education needs support based on their school profile.

The provision of a profiled allocation is designed to give a fair allocation for each school which recognises that all schools need an allocation for special needs support, but which provides a graduated allocation which takes into account the level of need in each school.

Schools are frontloaded with resources, based on each school's profile. The allocations to schools include provision to support all pupils in the schools, including where a child receives a diagnosis after the allocation is received by a school, or where there are newly enrolling pupils to the school.

Both the Department and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) are committed to ensuring that all schools are treated equally and fairly in the manner in which their school profiles have been calculated.

Accordingly, a number of review processes have been put in place to support schools.

A process is in place to address circumstances where the school profile significantly changed following the allocation process e.g. a developing school where the net enrolment numbers significantly increased.

The criteria for qualification for mainstream school developing school posts are set out in the Primary and Post Primary School Staffing Schedule for the 2021/22 school year.

Schools who qualify for additional mainstream developing school posts in accordance with these criteria also qualify for additional Special Education Teaching Allocations to take account of this developing status.

I can confirm that under the developing schools process this school have received a provisional allocation of 8 hours for the 2021/2022 school year, which brings the total provisional SET allocation for this school to 48 hours. The allocation of these additional hours will be confirmed once the increased enrolments are confirmed.

### **School Transport**

177. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Education if an update will be provided in relation to the issues surrounding the school transport scheme; the status of the review; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45566/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The School Transport Scheme is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department. In the 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs,

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

All children who are eligible for school transport and who 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.

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.

### **Schools Building Projects**

178. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education the steps she is taking to deliver on her capital building programme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45176/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department has a strong and ambitious rollout of projects under the school building programme to support the operation of the school system particularly in terms of additional capacity requirements.

During the NDP period 2018-2020, there were **526 completed building projects** under the Large Scale Capital Programme and the Additional School Accommodation Scheme. These projects delivered in excess of **48,000 school places**, including permanent accommodation for **229 special classes** and additional capacity for **67 classrooms in 14 special schools** throughout the country.

There are also currently some 250 school building projects on site many of which will be completed in 2022.

The main focus of resources over the last decade and for the coming period is on provision of additional capacity to cater for increasing demographics.

While at a national level, enrolment trends indicate that primary enrolments have passed their peak and that post primary enrolments will peak in the 2024/25 academic year, my Department is very much aware that there are variations to this trend at regional and local level. For that reason, my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and utilises a Geographic Information System, using data from a range of sources, including Child Benefit, school enrolment data and information on residential development activity in order to anticipate school place demand and identify capacity requirement priorities which will necessitate action. This is important in the context of ensuring alignment with the Government's Housing for All Plan.

While much progress has been made to date, the continued modernisation of school facilities will be a priority for my Department under the forthcoming revised NDP to 2030. This increased focus on the upgrade and refurbishment of the existing school stock will be further to the continued increase of school capacity to keep pace with demographic demand including provision for Special Education Needs.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

179. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Education the consultation she has had with education workers and their trade unions in relation to the safe reopening of education; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45605/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Department has had weekly engagements with stakeholders in relation to public health advice and the implementation of important infection prevention and control measures in schools so that they can continue to operate safely.

Throughout the pandemic detailed stakeholder engagement has been a critical factor in identifying the complex challenges that arise for schools and school leaders across a number of areas, including logistical challenges in meeting cleaning and physical distancing requirements, curriculum and assessment matters, and the wellbeing and welfare of the school community on reopening.

### **Pupil-Teacher Ratio**

180. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Education her views on the reason that Ireland failed to provide data on class sizes to inform the OECD Education at a Glance report 2020; her views on comments by an organisation (details supplied) that having 20% of pupils in classes of 30 or more is a national embarrassment; her plans to address the matter; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45604/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** We have provided data for the most recent OECD Education at a Glance report 2020. In table D2.1 page 354 refers, you will find the average class size for Ireland which is 24 for the reporting year 2018-2019. The data published in the OECD report is average class size by country, class size band data is not published.

The most recently published detailed class size information can be found in our Statistical Bulletin - July 2021.

For the 2020-2021 academic year 14.3% of pupils were in a class of 30 or more pupils, figure 5 in the bulletin refers.

Under the Programme for Government there is a commitment to seek to make further progress in reducing the pupil teacher ratios in primary schools.

For the 2021/22 school year, an improvement of one point in the appointment threshold in primary schools has been introduced and schools have been provided with class teachers on the basis of 1 teacher for every 25 pupils which is a historical low ratio. Lower thresholds are in place for DEIS Urban Band 1 schools. In addition, a three point reduction in the retention scale has also been introduced. These measures will help to ensure that less pupils are required to recruit or retain a teacher.

We are currently unable to calculate class size at post primary due to the difficulty of recording discrete class sizes where pupils have different subject choices and subject levels available to them.

### Education Costs

181. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the increased financial burden placed on families for back-to-school costs detailed in an annual back to school survey (details supplied) and the back to school survey by an organisation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45718/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department issued Circular 32/2017 which sets out principles of cost-effective practice to be adopted by schools to reduce the cost of school uniforms and other costs. These include that all elements of a school uniform should be purchasable from various stores, that wherever possible generic rather than branded items should be specified and the provision to parents of a list of all required items indicating the likely costs of these required items at best value stores.

Budget 2020 has been able to provide for a further 2.5% increase in standard capitation funding for primary schools that applied from the start of the 2020/21 school year. This builds on the 5% increase in capitation announced in budget 2019. The combined increases given in 2019 and 2020 mean that circa 40% restoration has now been achieved.

All schools have received the benefit of the capitation increases awarded to date. It is the intention to seek funding for further capitation increases in future budgets. However I must be prudent in the context of ongoing budgetary pressures giving the current economic circumstances.

Voluntary contributions by parents of pupils enrolled in recognised schools are permissible provided it is made absolutely clear to parents that there is no question of compulsion to pay and that, in making a contribution, they are doing so of their own volition.

My Department is also continuing to progress the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill through the Houses of the Oireachtas. The Bill has been passed by the Seanad and last July passed second stage in the Dáil. The overall aim of the Bill is to improve the level of engagement between the school community by inviting feedback, comment and observation from students and parents and by further developing a listening culture in schools. One of the key concepts of the Bill is the need for a school to consult with the school community on individual school plans, policies and activities.

This approach will help ensure that the various views of staff, students and parents will be heard and responded to by schools on policies and issues including back to school costs. The Bill also provides for schools to provide financial information to students and parents, including

information regarding voluntary contributions and how they are spent.

### School Funding

182. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education if a school principal can refuse to sign a children's allowance claim form until the payment of the schools voluntary contribution has been made; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45576/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Voluntary contributions by parents of pupils enrolled in recognised schools are permissible provided it is made absolutely clear to parents that there is no question of compulsion to pay and that, in making a contribution, they are doing so of their own volition.

The manner in which voluntary contributions are collected is a matter for school management, however their collection should be such as not to create a situation where either parents or pupils could reasonably infer that the contributions take on a compulsory character. In no circumstance should non-payment of a voluntary contribution impact on parents in the manner referred to by the Deputy.

Should the Deputy have relevant details of a school and parents involved my Department will follow up with the school concerned.

### State Examinations

183. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Education the reforms that will be made to the leaving certificate examinations to take into account the pressure on students from the pandemic and remote learning; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45606/21]

**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, parents, teachers, 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 of this year, 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 the document '*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 the Leaving Certificate Applied programme for 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.

While the above adjustments relate to the 2022 State examinations, the Deputy will be aware that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has undertaken an extensive review of senior cycle programmes and vocational pathways, including Transition Year, the Leaving Certificate Applied, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Established.

The review involved a very extensive range of research, consultations and communications with a wide range of stakeholders on all aspects of review and redevelopment over a number of phases over the period of the review. The NCCA also commissioned external expertise to support the process, including the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

The NCCA's *Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report* was submitted to my Department on 27 May for consideration and will be published shortly.

*Questions - Written Answers*  
**Special Educational Needs**

184. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education the steps she is taking to provide special needs assistants and resource teaching hours to all students who qualify for these supports. [45590/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The provision of education for children with special needs is an ongoing priority for Government. The numbers of special classes, special education teachers and Special Needs Assistants are at unprecedented levels.

The Department will spend approximately €2 Billion, or over 20% of its total educational budget on making additional provision for children with special educational needs in 2021.

This represents an increase of over 50% in total expenditure since 2011, at which point €1.247 Billion per annum was provided.

For the 2021/22 school year 2,118 special classes have been provided. This is an increase of 269 classes from the previous school year and will ensure that approximately 12,700 special class places will be available this year, including 1,600 new special class places.

Since 2011, the number of special classes in mainstream schools has increased by almost 386% from 548 to 2,118 for the 2021/2022 school year.

Budget 2021 provided for an additional 990 additional SNAs for allocation to schools, bringing the total numbers to 18,000 by December 2021.

This allocation of SNAs is to meet the care needs of pupils in 2021 and will enable the establishment of new special classes, creation of new places in special schools, support children in mainstream classes for the 2021/22 school year.

This will represent an increase of increase of 70% in the number of SNAs provided since 2011 at which point 10,575 SNAs were available.

The NCSE have published the SNA allocations on their website [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

Where circumstances change during the course of the 2021/22 school year that materially increase the level of care need in a school to the extent that the school can clearly demonstrate that it cannot be met within the existing SNA allocation, the school may apply to the NCSE for a review. Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website [ncse.ie/for-schools](http://ncse.ie/for-schools).

The NCSE manages the exceptional review process and handles each case individually. Some review requests can be concluded as an office based exercise, whilst others require a school to be visited. The timeframe for concluding a review can vary depending on the school context or the nature of the information provided.

The NCSE has responsibility for planning and coordinating school supports for children with special educational needs including the allocation of SNAs and reviews. The Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations.

The Special Education Teaching allocation provides a single unified allocation for special educational support teaching needs to each school, based on each school's educational profile.

Under the allocation model, schools have been provided with a total allocation for special education needs support based on their school profile.

The provision of a profiled allocation is designed to give a fair allocation for each school which recognises that all schools need an allocation for special needs support, but which provides a graduated allocation which takes into account the level of need in each school.

Schools are frontloaded with resources, based on each school's profile. The allocations to schools include provision to support all pupils in the schools, including where a child receives a diagnosis after the allocation is received by a school, or where there are newly enrolling pupils to the school.

There are review processes in place overseen by the NCSE which allow schools seek additional special education teachers and SNAs should their circumstances merit.

If a school wishes to make an exceptional needs review appeal they may do so at the following link: [ncse.ie/for-schools](https://ncse.ie/for-schools).

### **School Transport**

185. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Education if the school bus route for a school (details supplied) will be reviewed in order that it may include Ballyknockane Road; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45572/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The School Transport Scheme is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department. In the 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, were transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

Under the terms of the Department's Primary School Transport Scheme children are eligible for school transport where they reside not less than 3.2 kilometres from and are attending their nearest primary school as determined by my Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who completed the application and payment process on will be accommodated on school transport services for the 2021/22 school year where such services are in operation.

Bus Eireann has confirmed that families who reside in Ballyknockane Road area are not eligible to the school referred by the Deputy as they do not meet the distance eligibility criteria.

Children who are not eligible for school transport may apply for transport on a concessionary basis only. Concessionary transport is subject to a number of terms and conditions including the availability of spare seats on an existing service and payment of the annual charge. Routes will not be extended or altered, additional vehicles will not be introduced, nor will larger vehicles or extra trips using existing vehicles be provided to cater for children travelling on a concessionary basis.

*Question No. 186 answered with Question No. 127.*

187. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Education further to Parliamentary Question No. 401 of 15 September 2021, when she expects the contractor to be appointed for the construction of a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45502/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The school building projects referred to by the Deputy are being delivered under my Department's Design and Build Programme.

On June 14th 2021, the school building projects referred to by the Deputy proceeded to tender.

It is anticipated that a contractor will be appointed in Quarter 1 2022.

### **Employment Schemes**

188. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will advise on a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied); the reasons for these changes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45756/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** The State operates a managed employment permits system maximising the benefits of economic migration and minimising the risk of disrupting Ireland's labour market. The system is intended to act as a conduit for key skills which are required to develop enterprise in the State for the benefit of our economy, while simultaneously protecting the balance of the labour market.

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

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

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

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

## Work Permits

189. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the schemes available for employers looking to recruit outside of the State. [45759/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** Ireland operates a managed employment permits system maximising the benefits of economic migration and minimising the risk of disrupting Ireland's labour market. The regime is designed to accommodate the arrival of non-EEA nationals to fill skills and labour gaps for the benefit of our economy, in the short to medium term. However, this objective must be balanced by the need to ensure that there are no suitably qualified Irish/EEA nationals available to undertake the work and that the shortage is a genuine one. The system is, by design, vacancy led and driven by the changing needs of the labour market, expanding and contracting in tandem with its inherent fluctuations.

The employment permit system 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. These lists undergo twice yearly evidence-based reviews and include a public consultation process and extensive consultation with other Government Departments through the Interdepartmental Group on Economic Migration Policy.

The State's general policy is to promote the sourcing of labour and skills needs from within the workforce of Ireland, the European Union and other EEA states. Employment opportunities which arise in Ireland should, in the main, be offered to suitably skilled Irish and other EEA nationals, and should only be offered to non-EEA nationals who possess those skills and where no suitable candidate emerges from within the EEA to fill the vacancy. This policy also fulfils our obligations under the Community Preference principles of membership of the EU.

There are nine different types of employment permits to facilitate various different employment scenarios. The employment permit type specifically designed to address key skills shortages is the Critical Skills Employment Permit while the General Employment Permit is the primary permit used by the State to attract non-EEA nationals in occupations of a more general nature occupations where it can be demonstrated, following the application of a range of criteria including the Labour Market Needs Test (LMNT), that the employer was unable to fill the position from the Irish and EEA labour market and the occupation does not feature on the ineligible list.

My Department operates a Trusted Partner Initiative to ease the administrative burden on employers/connected persons/EEA contractors in expansion mode/start-ups and high-volume users of the employment permits regime. A Trusted partner employer will have reduced paperwork for permit applications and a faster turnaround in processing permit applications.

Employment permit policy is part of the response to addressing skills deficits which exist and are likely to continue into the medium term, but it is not intended over the longer term to act as a substitute for meeting the challenge of up-skilling the State's resident workforce, with an emphasis on the process of lifelong learning, and on maximising the potential of EEA nationals to fill our skills deficits.

## Workplace Discrimination

190. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade

and Employment when the stakeholder consultation of his Department on the International Labour Organisation Convention 190, Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work is due to commence. [45777/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** The ratification of ILO Convention C190 is a matter of priority for Ireland and my Department officials continue to work towards being amongst the first ILO member States to ratify, with plans to progress the ratification this year.

The issue of ratification by Ireland of International Labour Organisation Convention 190, Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work, is being considered in the context of our standard approach to the ratification of international instruments. Ireland does not ratify international conventions until it has been determined that national law is in line with the provisions of the international instrument.

Convention 190 is the first ever international instrument on the very important issues of eliminating violence and harassment in the world of work. Ireland already has very strong protections in law to combat violence and harassment in the world of work and has ratified the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention).

My officials are engaging with relevant Departments and offices to establish the extent to which domestic legislative provisions already provide for the rights and entitlements enunciated in the Convention, as well as legislative amendments, if any, that may be required to enable ratification.

Following this consideration, as part of the ratification process, my officials will undertake a stakeholder consultation with the social partners and other interested parties. It is anticipated that this will take place in the coming months.

I can assure you of Ireland's commitment to work towards being amongst the first ILO member States to ratify Convention 190.

### **Data Centres**

191. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of engagements the IDA has had with companies regarding data centres in the past 24 months. [45854/21]

192. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if the IDA has ever provided funding or support for businesses to open data centres in the State. [45855/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 191 and 192 together.

IDA Ireland has had, over the past 24 months, discussions and ongoing engagement with overseas companies, interested in investing, expanding or establishing in Ireland. These engagements may have included discussions with companies looking to establish a data centre in Ireland. Since 2020, IDA has been advised by clients about two data centre investments.

The IDA supports and facilitates companies to expand and establish in Ireland, and any company with an FDI mandate can receive financial support within the EU State Aid guide-

lines. Due to their capital intensity, and their location to date in the greater Dublin area, data centres have not benefitted from IDA Ireland financial assistance towards their construction or employment activities.

*Question No. 192 answered with Question No. 191.*

### **Redundancy Payments**

193. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the way the redundancy loan scheme for businesses announced during summer 2021 will operate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45856/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** In situations where employers are genuinely unable to meet their financial obligations in paying statutory redundancy to their employees, the State can fund statutory redundancy payments from the Social Insurance Fund (SIF) on their behalf.

In such situations and in order to support employers, a flexible and discretionary approach will be taken in relation to recovery of the redundancy debt. The Department of Social Protection will engage with employers directly and each case is assessed on its own merits. A mutually agreed repayment plan can be put in place, including repayments by instalment to ensure financial hardship is minimised. In many cases the debt can be repaid over a number of years.

During 2020 and 2021, €38 billion has been provided for COVID-19 related supports for businesses. These have been vital in sustaining workers and businesses through the various levels of restrictions. The Economic Recovery Plan sets out the Government's intention to invest in businesses and workers; help people get back into work, training, or education; provide enhanced and more targeted support for sectors that may lag behind and invest in infrastructure and reforms that enhance our capability and long-term capacity for growth.

### **Environmental Impact Assessments**

194. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the significant environmental and biodiversity impact on the Ardee bog if the current plans for the proposed N52 Ardee bypass proceed; the reason it has taken 21 years after initiating the project to retroactively undertake an environmental impact assessment; if his attention has been further drawn the destruction of the endangered curlew's habitat as a result of illegal fencing installed as part of the project in 2019; his plans to protect the Ardee bog and the biodiversity in the area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45801/21]

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

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

### **Rail Network**

195. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Transport when Kishogue rail station will open resulting in a local train service for commuters in Lucan, County Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45752/21]

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

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

### **Rail Network**

196. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Transport if he will urgently examine creating a DART station at Kilcock, County Kildare within the new DART+West plans (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45784/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure in the Greater Dublin Area, including the development and implementation of the DART+ Programme of which DART+ West is one element.

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

In the interim and noting the ongoing public consultation for DART+ West, I encourage all interested parties to engage in this process.

### **Tax Exemptions**

197. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Transport if an exception can be given regarding declaring a vehicle off the road after the fact and a waiver of motor tax arrears for a person (details supplied) who was seriously ill and out of the country for a long period of time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45786/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** There is a facility in place to declare a vehicle off the road where it is not going to be in use in a public place. This is underpinned by the provisions of the Non-Use of Motor Vehicles Act 2013. The primary purpose of the Act is to replace the system whereby a vehicle was declared off the road retrospectively with a system under which the vehicle must be declared off the road in advance.

The current procedures, only allowing for a future declaration of non-use, have been fully in force since 1st October 2013. Under the revised procedures, an owner can indicate that a

vehicle is going to be off the road by making a declaration of non-use at any time in the last month of an existing motor tax disc or previously made declaration of non-use. The declaration can be made for any number of calendar months between 3 and 12 months i.e. it cannot be made for a period of 1 or 2 months. However, if a vehicle is subsequently required to be put back on the road, the declaration can be broken at any time simply by taxing the vehicle, either online or through a motor tax office.

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

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

### **Driver Test**

198. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Transport the reason a person (details supplied) cannot renew a driver licence; the reason they must sit all their driving lessons and test again; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45812/21]

**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.

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

### **Cycling Policy**

199. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport if he has plans to provide for the use of helmet camera footage in the implementation and enforcement of the rules of the road particularly as it relates to the safety of cyclists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45844/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** The prosecution of offences arising from breaches of road traffic law fall under the responsibility of An Garda Síochána, as, ultimately, would any decision to accept helmet camera footage as the basis for such a prosecution. Questions relating to law enforcement come primarily under the remit of my colleague, the Minister for Justice.

As Minister for Transport I have, however, requested that video evidence such as that mentioned by the Deputy be considered in the broader context of camera-based enforcement as part of the forthcoming Road Safety Strategy.

### **Transport Policy**

200. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Transport if there are plans to introduce a bus service from Moylough and Mountbellew to University Hospital Portiuncula, Ballinasloe (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45909/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport, I am responsible for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, I am not involved in day-to-day operational matters. Given the NTA's statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally, I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the Authority for reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

### **Tax Reliefs**

201. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Transport the way he plans to facilitate rail users who have purchased commuter rail tickets to travel to work and who are now returning to the workplace on a two to three day basis; if he has discussed this issue with Irish Rail and with the Minister for Finance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45914/21]

**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.

### **Dublin Bus**

202. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Transport further to Parliamentary Question No. 129 of 3 March 2021, the reason there are no plans to change the 46a bus services at this time in view of the advantage it would offer to those accessing the bus service from Heuston Station; if routes from main transport hubs to hospitals in Dublin are regularly reviewed with regard to ease of connection; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45916/21]

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

As explained to the Deputy in my response to Dáil Question No. 129 of the 3 March 2021, the National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally and for the actual routes of these services. Therefore, any decision in relation to a possible change to the 46A bus route would be a matter for the Authority to make and not one that I would have any role in. In view of this, I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply.

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

### Tax Code

203. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Finance the plans he has to change the restrictive tax rules which can inflict a double tax on cross-Border workers who are based in Ireland, particularly when the temporary Covid-19 waiver on these rules ends in January 2022, in order to ensure that thousands of cross-Border workers do not face a financial penalty by seeking to work from home. [45767/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I assume that the Deputy's question may relate to the taxation of cross-border workers who are Irish resident but commute to work in another jurisdiction and claim relief in accordance with section 825A Taxes Consolidation Act 1997, which is commonly referred to as Trans-Border Workers' Relief.

The relief effectively removes the foreign employment income from a liability to Irish tax where foreign tax has been paid on that employment income (and such foreign tax is not refundable). In simple terms, the effect of the measure is that Irish tax will only arise where the individual has income other than income from a foreign employment.

The relief applies subject to certain conditions, which includes the requirement that the duties of a qualifying employment are performed wholly outside the State in a country with which Ireland has a Double Taxation Agreement. There is an exception in respect of merely incidental duties which may be performed in the State.

I am advised by Revenue that, in light of the unprecedented circumstances arising due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting public health restrictions to limit movement, for the tax years 2020 and 2021, a concessional treatment for such taxpayers would apply, whereby if employees are required to work from home in the State due to Covid-19, such days working at home in the State will not preclude an individual from being entitled to claim this relief, provided all other conditions of the relief are met. The effect of this concessional treatment allows individuals resident in the State and working for a non-resident employer carry out their employment duties in the State and continue to pay tax in another jurisdiction.

I am aware that there have been calls to place this concessional treatment on a statutory footing so that individuals who are resident in the State, but work outside the State for a non-resident employer, can continue to avail of the relief if they exercise their duties of employment in the State.

During the debates on Finance Bill 2020, I undertook that this matter would be examined as part of the work of the Tax Strategy Group (TSG) for 2021. The resultant paper was discussed by the TSG as part of its deliberations on 8 September last. The examination encompassed very detailed consideration of all relevant matters including the equity of treatment between Irish residents who pay tax in the State, the competitive position of Irish employers and the established principles of international tax. The review identified a number of significant concerns from a policy perspective when having regard to the interest of the wider body of taxpayers encompassing Irish resident employees and employers. The full TSG paper (TSG Paper 21/04) can be located here -

[www.gov.ie/en/collection/d6bc7-budget-2022-tax-strategy-group-papers/](http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/d6bc7-budget-2022-tax-strategy-group-papers/).

Over the coming weeks between now and Budget 2022, I propose to give this matter further detailed consideration having regard to the comprehensive review carried out under the aus-

pices of the TSG and the fundamental points which the TSG paper raises.

It should also be noted that Ireland has an extensive network of Double Taxation Agreements which have the effect of eliminating double taxation on the same income source. Relief is generally afforded by way of exemption or granting relief for foreign tax paid in the country of residence of the individual.

In the event that an individual does not qualify for Trans-Border Workers' Relief he/she may be entitled to relief from double taxation under the terms of the relevant Double Taxation Agreement, thus a double taxation charge would not arise in such circumstances.

### **Budget 2022**

204. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance his views on reducing the VAT on smokeless coal in Budget 2022 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45806/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** 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.

### **Budget 2022**

205. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to a pre-budget submission (details supplied) ahead of Budget 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45813/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** In advance of the Budget, as Minister for Finance I receive a large number of pre-budget submissions on a wide range of issues.

These can range from highly detailed and developed proposals for specific changes to existing taxes, reliefs, exemptions and allowances to more straightforward requests, for example, to increase the single person tax credit. Many submissions contain proposals across a range of taxes and allowances that are of particular relevance to the sector in which the person or representative organisation operates. Some are from individuals describing their personal circumstances to place their proposals in context.

The Deputy will be aware that many representative organisations publish their pre-budget submissions on their websites and see it as part of their communication strategy with their members. The vast majority of these pre-budget submissions are sent electronically to my office in the Department of Finance and this is the preferred method of receipt.

My office had not received the Dundalk Chamber budget submission when this PQ was put down. Nonetheless, its contents will be considered in the context of the forthcoming Budget.

However, as the Deputy may 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.

### **Fiscal Data**

206. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the projected General Government Balance as a percentage of both GDP and GNI\* in each of the years 2021 to 2069 consistent with the methodology and assumptions used in his Department's publication Population Ageing and the Public Finances in Ireland in the two scenarios outlined in table 6 of page 26, in which the SPA remains constant and in which previously legislated increases in the SPA take place in tabular form. [45847/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Department of Finance published a report entitled Population Ageing and the Public Finances in Ireland on Friday September 17th. The purpose of the report is to highlight the likely economic and budgetary impacts of population ageing in Ireland over the coming decades.

Included in the report, for illustrative purposes, is a hypothetical simulation that analyses the potential evolution of the budget balance and public debt in the event that budgetary policy did not adjust to the challenges posed by population ageing. In this hypothetical no-policy-change scenario, non-age related expenditure as a share of GDP/GNI\* is assumed to remain unchanged over the forecast horizon while total revenue is assumed to move in line with nominal GDP/GNI\*.

Age-related increases in public expenditure and a slower pace of revenue growth lead to the emergence of a significant deficit by the end of the next decade, reaching just below 3 per cent of GDP (4.7 per cent of GNI\*). The deficit is projected to continue to increase sharply thereafter, reaching just below 6 per cent of GDP (9.3 per cent of GNI\*) by 2070, without policy intervention.

As well as the baseline assumption of the State Pension Age (SPA) remaining at 66 years of age indefinitely, tables 1 and 2 below present simulations of the potential evolution of the budgetary balance if: a) the previously legislated increases in the SPA went ahead as planned (i.e. the SPA increased to 67 in 2021 and 68 in 2028); and b) if the previously legislated increases went ahead as planned and after that, the SPA increased by  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a year for every projected increase of one year in life expectancy.

The simulations suggest that linking the SPA to life expectancy would reduce the projected General Government Deficit by 1.4 percentage points of GDP (2.3 percentage points of GNI\*) by 2070. Analysis suggests that this would reduce the debt-to-GNI\* ratio by approximately 40 percentage points by the end of the projection period.

It is important to note that the simulations presented do not take into account second-round effects or non-linearities. For example, continuing to run deficits of this magnitude would, almost certainly, result in a significant risk premium, with adverse implications for sovereign borrowing costs and the interest bill. Increases in interest rates with such elevated levels of debt would put significant pressure on the public finances. In addition, the starting point for this exercise was outturn fiscal data from 2019. While the macroeconomic projections underpinning this analysis envisaged a sharp decline in output in 2020, they did not capture the significant increase in expenditure related to the support measures implemented by the Irish Government during the Covid-19 pandemic. As such, the deficit in this exercise in the short-term may be understated.

While these simulations are for illustrative purposes only, they do highlight the need for policy intervention.

The tables below present figures in the base year of the exercise, 2019, 2021 and after this, projections at a 10-year interval. My Department will provide the Deputy's office with projections for every year from 2021 to 2069, as requested.

**Table 1**

as per cent of GDP	2019	2021	2030	2040	2050	2060	2070
Baseline (SPA remains at 66)	0.5%	-0.3%	-1.5%	-3.1%	-4.5%	-5.2%	-5.7%
Increasing SPA as per previous legislation	0.5%	-0.2%	-1.1%	-2.6%	-4.0%	-4.7%	-5.2%
Linking SPA to life expectancy	0.5%	-0.2%	-1.1%	-2.4%	-3.5%	-4.0%	-4.3%

**Table 2**

as per cent of GNI*	2019	2021	2030	2040	2050	2060	2070
Baseline (SPA remains at 66)	0.9%	-0.5%	-2.5%	-5.0%	-7.2%	-8.4%	-9.3%
Increasing SPA as per previous legislation	0.9%	-0.3%	-1.9%	-4.2%	-6.5%	-7.7%	-8.5%
Linking SPA to life expectancy	0.9%	-0.3%	-1.8%	-3.9%	-5.6%	-6.6%	-7.0%

### Defective Building Materials

207. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance if homes affected by pyrite and therefore have no market value are exempt from paying local property tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45921/21]

208. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance the process by which a homeowner can confirm their exemption to paying the local property tax due to pyrite; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45922/21]

209. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance if a home (details supplied) is exempt from paying local property tax due to pyrite issues; and if he will make a statement

on the matter. [45923/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 207 to 209, inclusive, together.

Local Property Tax (LPT) operates on a self-assessment basis and it is a matter for the property owner in the first instance, to calculate the tax due based on his or her assessment of the market value of the property. When making an assessment, issues such as the presence of pyrite would be one of the factors that a property owner should take into account in valuing their property.

The qualifying criteria in respect of the exemption from LPT on foot of significant pyrite damage is set out in the Finance (Local Property Tax) (Amendment) Act 2015 for the current ‘valuation period’ (2013 to 2021). The criteria for the next ‘valuation period’ (2022 to 2025) is set out in the Finance (Local Property Tax) (Amendment) Act 2021.

In accordance with the legislation, a residential property is eligible for exemption from LPT on foot of pyrite related damage where:

1. a certificate of damage has been completed by a competent person or,
2. the property has been accepted into the Pyrite Remediation Scheme operated by the Pyrite Resolution Board or,
3. an insurance company has remediated the property or provided sufficient funds to carry out the remediation or,
4. the builder who constructed the property has remediated it or provided sufficient funds to carry out the remediation.

Property owners claiming the exemption under Criteria 1 must provide a certificate to Revenue, which is completed in accordance with I.S. 398-1.2013 as set down by the then Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government. Property owners claiming the exemption under Criteria 2 to 4 must also provide the relevant supporting documentation to Revenue.

Where the LPT exemption is granted, it applies for a fixed period of six years from the first ‘liability date’ (1 November) after the property is confirmed as meeting the eligibility conditions. For example, if a property qualifies for the exemption from the ‘liability date’ 1 November 2021, it will be exempt from LPT for the years 2022 to 2027 (inclusive). It is important to note that while the exemption is being phased out and will not be available after 21 July 2023, properties that become eligible on or before this date will still benefit for a period of six years.

Property owners whose properties meet the eligibility criteria can claim the ‘pyrite exemption’ when completing the LPT return for the next valuation period (2022 to 2025), which should be submitted by 7 November 2021. The relevant supporting documentation should also be submitted in support of the claim. Further details in relation to the qualifying criteria and how to claim an exemption for a property with significant pyrite damage are available on the Revenue website at [www.revenue.ie/en/property/local-property-tax/exemptions-apply-2022-2025/properties-certified-with-pyritic-damage.aspx](http://www.revenue.ie/en/property/local-property-tax/exemptions-apply-2022-2025/properties-certified-with-pyritic-damage.aspx), which may be of assistance to the Deputy.

Finally, I am advised by Revenue that the ‘liable person’ for the property referenced by the Deputy in Question 45923/21 has not made a claim for an exemption from LPT due to pyrite damage. Revenue has also advised that it will make direct contact with the person in the coming days to explain the eligibility criteria for the exemption and advise on the type of supporting documentation required.

*Question No. 208 answered with Question No. 207.*

*Question No. 209 answered with Question No. 207.*

### **Ethics in Public Office**

210. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his views on the current state of public ethics and standards in Irish political life given recent events; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45430/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I wish to assure the Deputy that neither I nor this Government are in any way complacent when it comes to the matter of ethics and standards in our political life.

Since its establishment in 2011, my Department has committed significant resources in terms of policy development and consultation across government to explore how the statutory framework for ethics can be reformed to make it fit-for-purpose. Legislation to this end which was brought forward by my predecessor in 2015 lapsed with the dissolution of the Dáil in advance of last year's general election, but we made a commitment in the new Programme for Government to "reform and consolidate the Ethics in Public Office legislation". As the Minister responsible, I recently brought proposals to Government for a review of the statutory framework for ethics in public life, which is the first step in delivering on our commitment.

This review will consider, inter alia:

- Ireland's existing ethics legislative framework;
- The recommendations of relevant tribunals of inquiry;
- Recommendations made by the Standards in Public Office Commission based on its operation of the current regime;
- The views of key stakeholders;
- Current EU/international best practice; and
- The views submitted during a public consultation.

The outcome of the review, which the Government agreed, will inform proposals for legislative reform that I intend to bring forward in 2022, with the ultimate goal of an easy to understand and user-friendly ethical framework that contributes to the quality and effectiveness of our public administration.

### **Brexit Supports**

211. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if there have been any further developments with regard to the Brexit Adjustment Fund; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33692/21]

213. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will report on Ireland's funding under the Brexit Adjustment Reserve. [34659/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to

take Questions Nos. 211 and 213 together.

At the end of June, agreement was reached between the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers on the European Commission's proposal for a Brexit Adjustment Reserve.

The Reserve has a total value of €5 billion in constant (2018) prices, or €5.47 billion in current prices. All Member States are to receive a provisional allocation.

I am pleased to say that Ireland has been allocated €1.065 billion in constant (2018) prices, equivalent to €1.165 billion in current prices. This represents 21% of the total value of the Reserve, the largest allocation for any Member State.

The reference period for expenditure under the Reserve runs from 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2023.

80% of the total Reserve will be made available as pre-financing in three instalments: 40% in 2021; 30% in 2022; 30% in 2023. The remaining 20% will be made available in 2025 once Member States have accounted to the Commission for expenditure under the Reserve. In Ireland's case, the bulk of expenditure will be in the form of pre-financing.

The objective of Reserve is to provide support to counter the adverse economic, social, territorial and, where appropriate, environmental consequences of the withdrawal of the UK from the EU. Importantly, the Reserve may only support measures specifically taken by Member States to contribute to this objective.

In Ireland's case, the allocation of resources from the Reserve will be aligned with the annual Estimates process. Ireland has already spent a considerable amount on preparing for Brexit, with successive budgets since the UK referendum providing significant supports for business and the agri-food sectors, as well as the infrastructure required at the port and airport to maintain the flow of east west trade.

Possible areas for support under Reserve include enterprise supports; supports for the agri-food sector; fisheries; reskilling and retraining; and infrastructure for the ports and airport.

In line with the requirements of the BAR Regulation, a Designated Body will be established within my Department to oversee expenditure under the Reserve.

### **An Garda Síochána**

212. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform when Leighlinbridge Garda station will be reopened; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [36766/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** A Programme for Government included for a 'pilot programme of station re-openings' throughout the country, including Leighlinbridge Garda Station.

Tenders for the refurbishment works were issued to contractors in July and submissions returned in August 2021.

The evaluation of tenders submitted is nearing completion and subject to the necessary approvals and ongoing discussion, regarding Garda priorities and the availability of funding, with An Garda Síochána it is expected that the contract for the works will be awarded in the fourth quarter of 2021.

The programme for the completion of the refurbishment works is approximately three months.

*Question No. 213 answered with Question No. 211.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

214. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the practical measures he will make to reward essential workers for the contribution they made to the fight against Covid-19; if these measures will include raising the minimum wage to €15 per hour, a four day working week, more public holidays and statutory holiday entitlements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43776/21]

224. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which he has examined ways and means to acknowledge the efforts and dedication of front-line workers throughout the Covid-19 pandemic; the options available to him in his Department to reward to such persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45873/21]

228. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the nature of any reforms proposed to ensure equity and reward throughout the public sector in line with requirements in the aftermath of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45877/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 214, 224 and 228 together.

The Government acknowledges the contribution of our frontline workers and all workers across the economy during the COVID-19 pandemic. The value of the contribution made by our frontline workers across the economy cannot be overstated. Their hard work and sacrifice has been crucial to getting the country through this pandemic and the Government is committed to recognising those efforts.

Working together has been a key element of the Government's approach to the pandemic to date, and this should form part of any approach to recognition also. It is important that in deciding on our approach to recognition, we recognise the contribution of workers across the public and private sector. The Government must consider the whole of the economy in its deliberations on this matter.

There are a number of issues that I will be considering and will be discussing with my Government colleagues in relation to recognition. In addition to the breathe of recognition, the timing and service delivery impact of any approach must be taken into account. I wish to assure the deputy that this issue is a priority for the Government and will be addressed in the near future.

In addressing the specific measures raised by the Deputy, matters such as the minimum wage, public holidays and statutory holiday entitlements are not within the remit of my Department. As noted, the Government will consider options to recognise essential workers and as such I cannot commit to specific measures at this time until the Government has had an opportunity to discuss these complex issues. I have addressed the matter of a four day week previously, noting that in light of the large potential costs and disruption to critical services I do not believe that it is the right time to consider a transition to a four day week for the public service.

### **Heritage Sites**

215. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of operations at a site (details supplied); and when he plans to open it for public use. [45841/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** Anne's Grove Gardens is scheduled to open to the public in 2022. Since 2016, The OPW has been engaged in a complex conservation project to restore the historic gardens and this major phase of refurbishment, which is the first in a series of phases, is nearing completion. It is planned to have the Gardens available to the public next year with a modest catering offering in place on site. The visitor experience will focus on the gardens and the important plant collection and visitors will have some opportunities to explore some of the restored courtyard areas.

Further phases of conservation works are planned relating to the main house and ancillary buildings. These projects are subject to planning permission and the availability of funding in the years ahead.

### **Tax Data**

216. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which the short and medium-term strategy of his Department is likely in any way to be affected by suggested changes in corporation profits tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45865/21]

218. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which he remains satisfied that current expenditure policy remains adequate to meet the challenges in the short to medium term; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45867/21]

219. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which public expenditure and reform strategies need to be revised to meet any challenges in the short to medium term; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45868/21]

220. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the areas of expenditure experiencing most pressure at the present time; if he expects to develop a short, medium and long-term expenditure and reform strategy to meet any exigencies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45869/21]

221. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the degree to which he expects to meet current expenditure requirements in the course of Budget 2022; the extent to which he has identified particularly sensitive areas needing attention; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45870/21]

222. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans for prudent and strategic expenditure in the short term in order to encourage economic recovery in the aftermath of Covid-19 and Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45871/21]

229. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which his Department has identified Departments affected by and overrun in expenditure which might not be related to Covid-19 or Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45878/21]

230. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which various Departments can be rewarded for adherence to public expenditure and reform guidelines while maintaining maximum level of service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45879/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 216, 218 to 222, inclusive, 229 and 230 together.

The medium term expenditure strategy to 2025 was set out in the Summer Economic Statement (SES) and detailed further in the Mid-Year Expenditure Report. This strategy aims to meet key challenges facing us in the short to medium term and reflects the Government's commitment to return the public finances to a more sustainable position; address our infrastructure challenges including in the key areas of housing and climate action; continue to enhance our public services and social supports; and ensure a balanced recovery from the pandemic. This will see core expenditure grow year by year by just over 5 per cent on average, in line with the trend growth rate of the economy, over the period to 2025 while providing for the careful phased withdrawal of Covid-19 related supports.

Potential reductions in corporation tax income as a result of the reforms to global corporation tax policy currently under discussion have been accounted for to the extent possible within this, with the revenue projections set out by the Department of Finance estimating a shortfall in receipts of €2 billion by 2025 compared to current tax policies remaining in place.

Discussions are currently underway on the allocation of resources as part of Budget 2022, within the parameters agreed by Government in the SES. This will see overall gross expenditure of €88.2 billion next year, including increased spending of €4.2 billion within the core expenditure ceiling of €80.1 billion. Of this additional spending, €1.1 billion will be increased investment under the National Development Plan, with €2.1 billion to meet the costs of maintaining existing levels of service and €1 billion to fund priority new expenditure measures.

Provision to meet the continued challenges posed by Covid-19, and by Brexit, has been included in spending projections for next year with temporary spending of €7 billion provided for in respect of Covid-19 related measures and the €1.1 billion Brexit Adjustment Reserve.

For 2021 spending, as per the end of August Fiscal Monitor overall gross expenditure was under profile by 3%. The Department of Social Protection showed the only overspend against profile, and this related to Covid-19 income and employment support schemes as the extension of the PUP and EWSS post end-June under the Economic Recovery Plan has not yet been included in profiles.

Given the significant level of resources to be provided under the medium term expenditure strategy, an ongoing and enhanced focus on value for money is required, including adherence to public expenditure guidelines, and we must ensure that there is the capacity to deliver this significant level of investment and build on the budgetary reforms already in place to drive spending efficiency and effectiveness.

### **Public Expenditure Policy**

217. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which he expects to rely on reform as a means of meeting public expenditure challenges ahead; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45866/21]

231. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform

the degree to which value for money targets continue to be met by various Departments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45880/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 217 and 231 together.

Over the last number of years, a range of reforms has been implemented in order to enhance Ireland's budgetary framework and ensure that expenditure is managed in an efficient and effective way. The intention of these reforms is to increase transparency around the budgetary process and to facilitate meaningful dialogue around key elements of the Budget and on what is being achieved with public funds.

Central to these reforms is the 'whole-of-year' budgetary framework. This refers to an ongoing consideration of budgetary priorities throughout the year, rather than focusing budget discussions only around Budget Day. An important element of this is the publication of a range of documents at key points in the year to enhance engagement on relevant budgetary issues.

Improving and supporting the evaluation capacity within Government Departments has also formed an important part of the reform programme. Supported by the establishment of the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service, this has led to the development of a number of additional processes and reports to support the budgetary framework.

A key objective of these reforms is to support sustainable growth in public expenditure while delivering improvements in public services. Pre-Covid, the average annual growth rate in spending on day-to-day services over the five year period 2015 to 2020 was projected at 4%, with the emphasis over this period being on catch-up growth in capital spending and sustainable growth in current spending targeted at key frontline services. This approach delivered a positive fiscal position as we entered the crisis caused by the pandemic, with a General Government surplus being recorded in 2019.

Looking forward, the strategy outlined in the SES provides for core expenditure growth of just over 5 per cent per annum on average over the period to 2025. This level of expenditure growth is prudent, sustainable and in line with the estimated trend growth rate of the economy.

The increases over the period to 2025 would see overall core expenditure grow from €70 billion pre-Covid as set out in REV 2020, to €93 billion in 2025. This significant level of expenditure on services and investment in infrastructure requires that there is a continued focus on ensuring that this expenditure delivers value for money and improved outcomes. Sustainability in expenditure not alone requires that the overall level of expenditure remains affordable over the longer term, but also that it delivers sustainable improvements in public services and infrastructure. This requires an ongoing focus on the quality of expenditure.

In light of this, the Programme for Government commits to continuing reform and improvement of the budgetary process, including an enhanced focus across Government on issues of performance and national well-being. In implementing further reforms, my Department will look to build on the budgetary reforms already in place and the significant work on public service reform already completed. Adopting this approach will support stronger dialogue on key elements of budgetary policy and will help to facilitate the continued development of budgetary decisions, consistent with the maintenance of stable public finances.

*Question No. 218 answered with Question No. 216.*

*Question No. 219 answered with Question No. 216.*

Question No. 220 answered with Question No. 216.

Question No. 221 answered with Question No. 216.

Question No. 222 answered with Question No. 216.

### Economic Policy

223. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which he has had discussions with his EU colleagues with a view to common strategy in the aftermath of Brexit and Covid-19 with particular reference to the need to maximise opportunities for the domestic economy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45872/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Over the past eighteen months, two issues have dominated the policy landscape, namely the global pandemic, and the UK's departure from the EU.

In relation to the global pandemic, the European Union has responded with an unprecedented €800 billion recovery package, *NextGenerationEU*. At the heart of this package is the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility.

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan will enable Ireland to access funding under the Recovery and Resilience Facility. The Plan has a total value of €990 million. Its overall objective is to contribute to a sustainable, equitable, green and digital recovery, in a manner that complements and supports the Government's broader recovery effort. It is aligned with domestic policies, notably the Economic Recovery Plan and the National Development Plan.

On 24 March 2021 the Minister for Finance and I met the European Commissioner for Economy, Paolo Gentiloni, to discuss Ireland's draft Plan. The draft Plan was submitted to the European Commission on 28 May 2021.

On 16 July 2021 I met Commission President Ursula von der Leyen when she travelled to Dublin to present the Commission's positive assessment of the Plan to the Taoiseach. On 6 September 2021 I joined the Minister for Finance at a meeting of EU Finance Ministers where Ireland's Plan received Council approval.

On 21 September 2021 I met Economy Commissioner Paolo Gentiloni to discuss our Plan, and we both took part in an online stakeholder event hosted by the Institute of International and European Affairs.

In relation to the UK's departure from the EU, the Union has put in place funding for the Member States and sectors most affected through the Brexit Adjustment Reserve. The Reserve has a total value of €5 billion in constant (2018) prices, or €5.47 billion in current prices.

I am pleased to say that Ireland has been allocated €1.065 billion in constant (2018) prices, equivalent to €1.165 billion in current prices. This represents 21% of the total value of the Reserve, the largest allocation for any Member State.

The objective of Reserve is to provide support to counter the adverse economic, social, territorial and, where appropriate, environmental consequences of the withdrawal of the UK from the EU.

In Ireland's case, the allocation of resources from the Reserve will be aligned with the annual Estimates process. Ireland has already spent a considerable amount on preparing for

Brexit, with successive budgets since the UK referendum providing significant supports for business and the agri-food sectors, as well as the infrastructure required at the ports and airport to maintain the flow of east west trade.

In addition, Ireland continues to benefit from Structural Funds under the EU's Cohesion Policy. I will be travelling to Brussels in November for a meeting of Cohesion Policy Ministers where I will have an opportunity to discuss with colleagues how we can respond to the shared challenges we face.

*Question No. 224 answered with Question No. 214.*

### **Legislative Measures**

225. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which any issues arising in the context of FEMPI have been adequately addressed and resolved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45874/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The process of unwinding the Financial Emergency (FEMPI) legislation commenced under the Lansdowne Road Agreement 2016 – 2018, with the remainder of the process largely completed under the Public Service Stability Agreement 2018 – 2020 (PSSA). This will continue under 'Building Momentum: A New Public Service Agreement, 2021 – 2022'.

At this point, salary rates up to €150,000, which accounts for 99% of the public service, have been fully restored. Section 20 of the Public Service Pay and Pensions Act 2017 sets out restoration for public servants in with annualised basic salaries above €150,000, which is due on 1 July 2022 and will complete the unwinding of FEMPI in relation to pay.

Each year, under the terms of the FEMPI Act 2013, I am obliged to carry out an annual review of the operation, effectiveness and impact of the FEMPI Acts, having regard to the overall economic conditions in the State and national competitiveness. In this annual review, I am also to consider whether or not any of the provision of the relevant Acts continue to be necessary having regard to the purposes of those Acts, the revenues of the State and State commitments in respect of public service pay and pensions.

The 2021 annual review, a written report of which was laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas on the 25th June 2021, recommended the continuation of the unwinding of the FEMPI measures in line with the provisions enacted in the Public Service Pay and Pensions Act 2017.

### **Public Procurement Contracts**

226. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which his Department continues to monitor public contracts with a view to achieving optimum value for money while at the same time facilitating an expeditious process leading to increased efficiency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45875/21]

232. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which the procurement process remains focused on ensuring the elimination of delays that might be associated with consequent higher costs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45881/21]

233. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the

steps taken to speed up the processing of various public contracts while protecting the interests of the taxpayer in all Departments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45882/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 226, 232 and 233 together.

Each individual Accounting Officer is responsible for the monitoring of performance of public contracts under his or her remit and for ensuring that the public procurement function is discharged in line with the standard accounting and procurement rules and procedures efficiently and effectively to deliver maximum value for money for the taxpayer.

Public Procurement is governed by EU legislation and national rules and guidelines with the aim of promoting an open, competitive and non-discriminatory public procurement regime which delivers best value for money. All Irish public bodies are obliged to spend or invest public funds with care, and to ensure that optimal value for money is obtained in accordance with the Public Spending Code which sets out the rules and procedures to ensure that these standards are upheld across the Irish public service.

The Office of Government Procurement (OGP), an office within my Department, has responsibility for the National Public Procurement Policy Framework (NPPPF) which sets the overarching policy framework for public procurement in Ireland. The NPPPF consists of 5 strands: Legislation (Directives, Regulations); Policy (Circulars, etc.); General Guidelines; the Capital Works Management Framework (CWMF); and detailed technical guidelines, template documents and information notes that issue periodically. This framework enables a consistent approach to public procurement across the public sector to deliver value for money for the taxpayer.

To assist Contracting Authorities in the conduct of procurement procedures, the OGP has published extensive guidance material for contracting authorities including the Public Procurement Guidelines for Goods and Services (the Guidelines) available at: [www.gov.ie/en/publication/c23f5-public-procurement-guidelines-for-goods-and-services/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c23f5-public-procurement-guidelines-for-goods-and-services/) and the Capital Works Management Framework (CWMF) available at: [www.gov.ie/en/service/1d443-capital-works-management-framework/#](http://www.gov.ie/en/service/1d443-capital-works-management-framework/#).

The Guidelines outline the various stages of the procurement process from specification, through to selection and award stages, and through to the contract management stage. They provide comprehensive guidance on ensuring the specifications fully and accurately capture the requirement of the goods or services and identify the risks of poor specification and the challenges that this can cause Contracting Authorities when subsequently managing their contracts. The OGP and its sector partners in Health, Education, Local Government and Defence have a range of centralised procurement frameworks and dynamic purchasing systems in place in respect of sixteen categories of common goods and services to minimise administration and to deliver enhanced service levels and value for money promptly and efficiently. Contracting authorities are encouraged to check the Office of Government Procurement website for existing or planned procurement arrangements which may meet their needs.

All public works projects that are delivered under the Exchequer-funded element of the Government's capital plan must be procured in accordance with the provisions laid down in the Capital Works Management Framework (CWMF). The CWMF is mandated by circular and was developed to provide an integrated set of contractual provisions, guidance material, technical templates and procedures, which cover all aspects of the delivery process of a public works project from inception to final project delivery and review to assist contracting authorities in meeting their ongoing procurement requirements. The Public Works Contract is a key component of the CWMF. It is a lump sum, fixed-price contract. Fixed price contracts operate

best when tendered on the basis of a comprehensively designed project. A well-defined project enables greater efficiency since it provides the necessary information up front so the contractor can schedule the works and commence early engagement with their sub-contractors on price.

It is a matter for each contracting authority to set the timeframe for responses which they deem appropriate given the nature of the contract, provided they fall within the timeframes as laid down in the Procurement Regulations, where applicable. For tenders above EU Thresholds, minimum time limits are set down in the Procurement Regulations for the different stages of a contact award procedure. The Regulations provide for accelerated procedures in certain circumstances e.g. emergency purposes. For below EU Threshold procurements, sufficient time must be permitted for preparation and submission of responses to allow for genuine competition and for SMEs to participate in the tender process. Contracting authorities are advised to consider the complexity of a contract when setting time limits for receipt of tenders and the Guidelines provide assistance to Contracting Authorities in this regard.

### **Public Sector Pay**

227. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans in respect of public service pay in the future in the context of ensuring fair and equitable recognition throughout the public sector while at the same time protecting structured reform and adequate recognition of need throughout the public sector with particular reference to the lower paid; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45876/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Building Momentum – A New Public Service Agreement 2021-2022 (hereinafter referred to as the “Agreement”) provides for the following pay adjustments:

- A general round increase in annualised basic salary for all public servants of 1% or €500, whichever is greater, on October 2021.
- The equivalent of a 1% increase in annualised basic salaries to be used as a Sectoral Bargaining Fund, in accordance with Chapter 2 of the Agreement, on 1 February 2022.
- A general round increase in annualised basic salaries for all public servants of 1% or €500, whichever is greater on, 1 October 2022.

These increases in annualised basic salaries are heavily weighted towards those at lower incomes with headline increases of approx. 5% for the lowest paid public servants. These groups will also benefit more from other measures in the Agreement including the overtime rates and premia payment adjustments.

Public servants who are due an amount of pay restoration in 2021 or 2022, under Section 19 and 20 of the Public Service Pay and Pensions Act 2017, respectively, will not receive the general round increase in that year. However, if the amount of restoration due is less than the general round increase, they will be paid the balance on the date of the general round increase.

Currently, public servants with salaries under €150k have been restored to pre-FEMPI levels (as of 1 July 2021). Those earning above €150k are due to be restored by 1 July 2022.

Building Momentum represents a strong commitment to continuing reform in the public service. The provisions that underpin industrial peace are strengthened by the Agreement – an essential ingredient in the recovery of our economy post Covid. Building on the momentum of reform and change exemplified by the public service during this public health emergency,

the Agreement allows for on-going co-operation with change and productivity improvements and industrial peace until 2022. It supports structured reform on a sectoral level and sectoral bargaining relates to negotiations within sectors to progress reforms and resolve issues between the parties.

*Question No. 228 answered with Question No. 214.*

*Question No. 229 answered with Question No. 216.*

*Question No. 230 answered with Question No. 216.*

*Question No. 231 answered with Question No. 217.*

*Question No. 232 answered with Question No. 226.*

*Question No. 233 answered with Question No. 226.*

### **Public Expenditure Policy**

234. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to change public works contracts to include a price variation clause to take account of the recent abnormal increases in the cost of building material; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45771/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Government policy (through Circular 33/06) requires all public works projects that are delivered under the Exchequer-funded element of the National Development Plan to be procured in accordance with the provisions laid down in the Capital Works Management Framework (CWMF). Public works contracts are fixed price contracts, which are to be comprehensively defined prior to tender. The contractor prices for the risk of increases in the cost of labour, materials and certain changes in law for the periods specified.

The provisions for inflation under a public works contract with a value in excess of €1m are as follows:

- The price remains fixed for a defined period, typically 30 months from the date of the award of the contract.
- After the expiry of the fixed price period, the contractor may recover the excess percentage above a 10% threshold on price increases that arise at the end of the fixed price period.
- Conversely, where the price of materials has decreased the Employer obtains the benefit of a reduction in the contract sum to the value of the percentage in excess of 10% for materials purchased after the fixed price period has expired.
- Where material price increases occur within the fixed-price period, there is a mechanism for adjusting the contract sum for hyperinflation in material costs. The increased costs above a 50% threshold in any one month may be recovered.

For projects with a value less than €1m there is no adjustment for price inflation because they are used on straightforward projects of short duration.

With the exception of occasional spikes due primarily to movements in key commodities,

the price of construction materials has been reasonably predictable for almost a generation.

Significant increases in construction material prices have arisen suddenly since the beginning of this year. There are two main reasons:

1. Material shortages due to the disruption to supply chains; to manufacturing and logistics that has arisen since the onset of the pandemic;
2. Global economies are re-opening resulting in a sudden increase in demand.

Where price increases (or decreases) are consistent, they can be factored into the price. What differentiates the current situation is the uncertainty with respect to the intensity, duration and scale of the price movements.

Not all construction materials are displaying the same rate of increase, typically building projects are impacted to a greater extent than civil engineering projects due to the range of materials that are currently showing significant increases.

The Office of Government Procurement (OGP) is currently considering the optimum means to bring greater certainty with respect to future tenders in light of this uncertainty.

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

235. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when the Covid-19 support package for coláiste samhraidh will be announced. [45810/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** I recently established a fund worth €2.2m to support eligible Gaeltacht families who normally provide accommodation for summer college students. This funding is being provided on foot of the cancellation of Irish language courses for the second summer in succession due to COVID-19.

Under a second and separate measure, further funding of c €240,000 is being provided by my Department to support the running of Gaeltacht community halls normally used by summer colleges.

Preparatory work in developing a third support measure, on foot of detailed engagement with all of the colleges, is nearing completion and I hope to formally announce the result of this process shortly.

The overall objective of all of these measures is to support the sector in making a full return to normal service in 2022, thus enabling it to continue to contribute to the systematic effort being made to support the Irish language and the Gaeltacht in line with overarching objectives of the Government's *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030* and the accompanying *5-Year Action Plan for the Irish Language 2018-2022*.

### **Local Authorities**

236. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will consider increasing the Local Government Fund to address the ongoing lack of funding to Galway County Council. [45772/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** The funding system that applies to local authorities is a complex one, as authorities derive their income from a variety of local sources including commercial rates, Local Property Tax (LPT), charges for goods and services and funding from Central Government. It is a matter for each local authority as to how it can maximise local income sources and manage its own spending, in the context of the annual budgetary process.

Central Government funding of local authorities similarly presents a complex picture, with transfers, both current and capital, coming from a wide range of Departments and Offices, not solely from my Department, for a variety of purposes. Some streams of funding are delivered directly from funding departments to local authorities, while others are routed through departmental agencies.

Most of the funding sourced from Central Government and provided to local authorities must be used for specified services. These can be grouped into 5 broad programme categories: recreational, education, environment, housing and transport.

In 2019, total transfers of funding from all central government sources to local authorities exceeded €2.6 billion. Additional detail on Central Government funding of local authorities is provided in the Comptroller and Auditor General's Annual Report, accessible at the following link:

[www.audit.gov.ie/en/Find-Report/Publications/2020/2019-Annual-Report-Chapter-2-Central-government-funding-of-local-authorities.pdf](http://www.audit.gov.ie/en/Find-Report/Publications/2020/2019-Annual-Report-Chapter-2-Central-government-funding-of-local-authorities.pdf)

Across all schemes and funding sources my Department provided €51.1m in 2019 and €82.9m in 2020 to Galway County Council. The increase in 2020 was due to an increase in capital funding for housing, the Covid Rates waiver and for additional expenses and lost income due to the Covid pandemic. The payments in 2020 also included a once-off allocation of €1m. This funding was linked to the operation of municipal districts and was subject to a small number of requirements, including that the funding be divided equally among the municipal districts.

LPT was introduced to provide a stable and sustainable funding base for the local authority sector, providing greater levels of connection between local revenue and associated expenditure decisions. LPT broadens the tax base by reducing the level of central funding required by local government.

Local retention of LPT was introduced in 2015 and since then, 80% of the estimated LPT liability in each local authority area for a given year is retained in that area to fund public services, notwithstanding any local variation decisions. The remaining 20% of LPT is currently re-distributed via the Local Government Fund to provide equalisation funding to those local authorities that have lower property tax bases, due to the variance in property values and density across the country.

My Department recently confirmed provisional LPT allocations to local authorities for 2022 amounting to €528m, notwithstanding any local variation decisions. The €34.3m shortfall between the 20% contribution from all local authorities and the total amount required for equalisation is met by the Exchequer. Local authorities may vary their LPT rate by up to 15%; authorities that increase the rate retain 100% of the additional income, while local authorities that decrease the rate bear the full reduction in income. I note that Galway County Council has not opted to avail of this opportunity since 2018.

The Programme for Government 'Our Shared Future', commits to bringing forward LPT

reforms. These reforms will involve bringing new homes, which are currently exempt from LPT, into the taxation system as well as providing for all money collected locally to be retained within the county. This will also be done on the basis that those counties with a lower LPT base are adjusted via an annual national equalisation fund paid from the Exchequer, as is currently the case.

When detailed information on the new LPT yield, becomes available following the revaluation process, my Department will review the allocation process.

### **Local Elections**

237. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the grades of local authority employees who are permitted or disqualified from standing for local elections; and the relevant legislation in which this is outlined. [45804/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** Section 13 of the Local Government Act 2001 provides for disqualifications from local authority membership.

Section 13(1)(i) of the 2001 Act provides that a person who is employed by a local authority and is not the holder of a class, description or grade of employment designated by the Minister by order under section 161(1)(b) of the 2001 Act shall also be disqualified from membership of a local authority. Section 161 of the 2001 Act refers to restrictions on local authority employment and membership of a local authority.

In 2004, the then Minister for Environment, Local Government and Heritage, under Section 161 of the 2001 Act, signed the Local Government Act 2001 (Section 161) Order 2004 which provides that the disqualification set out in Section 13 would not apply in respect of “*every class, description or grade of employment the maximum remuneration for which on the last date for receipt of nominations at a local election does not exceed the maximum remuneration for the grade of Clerical Officer*”. Circular LG(P) 06/09 issued to local authority employees in this regard in May 2009.

### **Seaweed Harvesting**

238. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the assistance being put in place for persons who are harvesting seaweed using traditional methods who wish to apply for a seaweed harvesting licence given that the window to register traditional seaweed harvesting rights on folios is drawing to a close (details supplied); if he plans to offer assistance with the environmental screening and assessments which are required as part of the licence application; the way he will ensure that the rights of traditional harvesters are respected and that seaweed harvesting process remains accessible to persons from the local community; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45846/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** In his speech at the Harnessing Our Ocean Wealth Summit in 2018, the then Minister with responsibility for the 1933 Foreshore Act, Minister Damien English T.D. clarified that certain rights, of both a formal and informal nature, to harvest seaweed exist and must be respected in the context of determination of applications to hand harvest seaweed under the 1933 Foreshore Act.

The legal registration of such informal rights, such as those that might be held by traditional seaweed harvesters, is a matter for the Property Registration Authority of Ireland (PRAI) and those wishing to register their rights should engage directly with them. Accordingly, my Department has no role in that process.

If a claim is being made for registration of a prescriptive right, section 38 of the Land and Conveyancing Law Reform Act 2009 (*as amended by the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2011*) applies. A claim can be established up until 30 November 2021. The current position is that a claimant may not make an application under the law that applied prior to the introduction of the Land and Conveyancing Law Reform Act 2009 after 30 November 2021. From 1 December 2021, any application would have to be made under the provisions set out in the 2009 Act itself. However, section 33(b)(ii) of the 2009 Act provides for a 60-year limitation period in respect of claims of prescriptive rights to take seaweed.

My Department will adjust its Seaweed Foreshore Licensing processes and procedures if needed, to reflect any future changes made to the Land and Conveyancing Acts which fall within the remit of the Department of Justice.

Details on the background and future plans related to Seaweed Harvesting are set out in Chapter 20 of the National Marine Planning Framework and can be viewed at the link below:

[www.gov.ie/en/publication/60e57-national-marine-planning-framework/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/60e57-national-marine-planning-framework/)

### **Valuation Office**

239. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the reason the Valuation Office telephone helpline is currently closed; when the office will reopen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45862/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** The Commissioner of Valuation is independent in the exercise of his functions under the Valuation Acts 2001-2020.

I am advised by the Commissioner that the Valuation Office telephone helpline is open. Its Public Office is open to members of the public on an appointment only basis. Further information is available directly from the Valuation Office, if required.

Arrangements have been put in place by all bodies under the aegis of my Department to facilitate the provision of information directly to members of the Oireachtas. The contact email address for the Valuation Office is [oireachtas.enquiries@VALOFF.ie](mailto:oireachtas.enquiries@VALOFF.ie).

### **Water Pollution**

240. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the extent to which any pollution of the water supply has affected the various towns throughout north County Kildare and south County Meath; the degree to which the causes of such pollution have been identified; the reason the public were not immediately alerted; if any danger continues to exist for consumers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45907/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Ballymore Eustace Plant provides a water supply to the areas of Dublin City Council, Dun

Laoghaire Rathdown and North Kildare.

In a letter to my Department last week, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) outlined two serious incidents in recent weeks that occurred in drinking water plants serving parts of Dublin City and surrounding areas (the Ballymore Eustace water treatment plant) and in Gorey, Co. Wexford. This included, in the case of Gorey, illnesses detected by the HSE in the community served by that water supply.

It is important to note that these incidents have been rectified and the water supply from the two plants is now safe to drink.

In their letter, the EPA stated that an abject failure in management oversight, operational control and responsiveness at two public drinking water treatment plants had allowed unsafe water to enter into the public drinking water supply and endanger public health.

I find the failures identified by the EPA concerning and unacceptable – peoples' safety is paramount. Our drinking water must be wholesome and clean and delivered by supply systems that are secure and reliable.

Following the receipt of the EPA's letter, I met with the Managing Director of Irish Water as well as both the Chief Executives of Dublin City Council and Wexford County Council at the weekend. I have requested Irish Water to immediately undertake an audit of each water treatment plant across the country. Irish Water will prioritise the 20 largest water treatment plants, visiting each of them, to ensure that proper processes are in place in terms of dealing with and escalating any incidents which may arise. Irish Water's Managing Director and the local authority Chief Executives each assured me of their full cooperation and that their organisations would be working together to put in place the urgent and necessary corrective measures.

Irish Water will also work with each local authority over the coming two weeks, conducting re-fresher training on incident reporting for all plants. Where appropriate, Irish Water will now put its own staff on site, to ensure the continued safety of water treatment plants. I have also requested that local authorities work with Irish Water to improve the linkages with the Irish Water National Water Control centre.

Ultimately, there are limitations to the current working arrangements between Irish Water and local authorities and it is impacting on the delivery of services. A process is underway in the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) to deliver the transformation of this service but I have also requested that Irish Water and local authorities to take further steps to improve Irish Water control of all water service plants in the immediate term pending the implementation of the agreed longer term operational and staffing arrangements. I will meet again with Irish Water and the local authorities in question on Monday, 04 October 2021.

### **Passport Services**

241. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of a passport application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45760/21]

252. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a passport will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Mayo in view of the fact that they have travel arrangements. [45859/21]

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

241 and 252 together.

With regard to the specific applications about which the Deputies have enquired, the Passport Service has already issued a passport to the applicant.

The current turnaround times are 10 working days for Simple Adult renewals, 15 working days for Complex renewals, 40 working days for First Time Applications on Passport Online and 8 weeks for Passport Express for applications which have been completed correctly.

### **Passport Services**

242. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the rapid passport renewal service will be reopened; the timeline for passport offices to reopen to the public; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45762/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** In line with the continued scaling up of Passport 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.

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.

### **Passport Services**

243. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of an application for a passport by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45785/21]

244. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when a passport will issue in the case of a person (details supplied); if an individual and specific reply will be provided by him; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45797/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 243 and 244 together.

With regard to the specific applications about which the Deputies have enquired, the Passport Service has provided an update as to the steps they must take to progress their passport application.

The current turnaround times are 10 working days for Simple Adult renewals, 15 working days for Complex renewals, 40 working days for First Time Applications on Passport Online and 8 weeks for Passport Express for applications which have been completed correctly.

*Question No. 244 answered with Question No. 243.*

### Passport Services

245. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a passport can be issued in the case of a person (details supplied); if an individual and specific reply will be provided by him; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45798/21]

247. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when a passport is likely to issue in the case of a person (details supplied); if an individual and specific reply will be provided by him; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45800/21]

248. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of a passport application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45805/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 245, 247 and 248 together.

With regard to the specific applications about which the Deputies have enquired, the Passport Service has provided an update on the status of the passport application to the applicant.

The current turnaround times are 10 working days for Simple Adult renewals, 15 working days for Complex renewals, 40 working days for First Time Applications on Passport Online and 8 weeks for Passport Express for applications which have been completed correctly.

### Passport Services

246. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when a passport will issue in the case of a person (details supplied); if an individual and specific reply will be provided by him; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45799/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** With regard to the specific application about which the Deputy has enquired, the Passport Service cannot process an application until the required supporting documents have been received.

The current turnaround times are 10 working days for Simple Adult renewals, 15 working days for Complex renewals, 40 working days for First Time Applications on Passport Online

and 8 weeks for Passport Express for applications which have been completed correctly.

*Question No. 247 answered with Question No. 245.*

*Question No. 248 answered with Question No. 245.*

## **Human Rights**

249. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the actions his Department is taking to address the recent re-arrests of Christians in Eritrea (details supplied) who were previously imprisoned in violation of their right to freedom of religion and belief; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45815/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy):** I am deeply concerned by the imprisonment of Christians in Eritrea on the basis of their religious belief.

The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (more commonly referred to as freedom of religion and belief) is regarded as a fundamental freedom, provided for under Article 18 of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights. Ireland strongly condemns all forms of persecution on the basis of religion or belief, irrespective of where they occur or who the victims are.

The promotion of freedom of religion or belief is therefore a priority for Ireland's human rights engagement at both multilateral and bilateral levels, as reaffirmed in 'The Global Island: Ireland's Foreign Policy for a Changing World'. Ireland consistently co-sponsors resolutions on freedom of religion or belief at the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council. During our Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2013, Ireland played a key role in the development and adoption of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief. These Guidelines provide a framework for the promotion of freedom of religion and belief in the EU's external human rights policy.

Ireland has consistently expressed concern about the human rights situation in Eritrea, including through our engagement at the United Nations Human Rights Council. Thus far in 2021, Ireland has made two statements on Eritrea at sessions of the Human Rights Council, echoing the call of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea for the Eritrean authorities to cooperate with UN and AU human rights mechanisms to address ongoing human rights violations. Ireland has also contributed to the drafting of EU statements and negotiations on the renewal of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea. In our interventions at the Council, we have particularly recalled the 2016 findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, and its conclusion that crimes against humanity have been committed in Eritrean detention facilities, military training camps and other locations, and noting that there has been minimal progress towards reform. Despite the release of some prisoners who had been detained for their expression of religious belief last year, arbitrary arrests and incommunicado detention are common practices, with individuals continuing to be detained in violation of international law.

Ireland has consistently urged Eritrea to comply with its obligations under international law and cooperate with both the Special Rapporteur and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and has repeatedly raised this at EU level.

In March 2021, the EU imposed sanctions on Eritrea's National Security Agency under the new EU Global Human Rights Sanctions regime, citing responsibility of the Agency for serious human-rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests, extra-judicial killings, enforced disappearances and torture by its agents.

Ireland continues to be extremely concerned by the ongoing conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia, now into its tenth month, in which Eritrean troops are participating, and which in recent months has spilled over into neighbouring regions of Amhara and Afar. The conflict continues to have a devastating impact on local populations, and poses severe risks to the stability of Ethiopia, and the wider Horn of Africa region. Ireland has called for all parties to the conflict to end hostilities, and for Eritrean troops to withdraw immediately. Addressing the situation in Ethiopia—including the presence of Eritrean troops—remains a key priority for Ireland, whether bilaterally, at the Human Rights Council, through European Union fora, and in the context of our UN Security Council membership.

My officials and Ireland's Embassies in Nairobi (accredited to Eritrea) and Addis Ababa, continue to monitor the human rights situation in Eritrea and Ethiopia closely, including the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

## Human Rights

250. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on whether the attacks on education by Israeli forces in the Occupied Palestinian Territory are a deliberate attempt to make the teaching and learning environment unsafe for Palestinian children; his further views on whether the educational process has been severely hampered and disrupted as a result of these attacks and that the dignity and security of Palestinian students and teaching staff have been repeatedly and deliberately violated through the systematic targeting and legal discrimination of the occupying power; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45845/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I remain gravely concerned by the ongoing human rights situation in the occupied Palestinian territory and particularly the impact on children and their education. Ireland has repeatedly emphasised that the rights of children to protection, safety, and well-being must be upheld at all times.

I fully endorse the statement of 9 September 2021 by European Commissioner for Crisis Management, Janez Lenarcic, on the International Day to Protect Education from Attack, which underlined that attacks on education constitute violations of International Humanitarian Law.

Ireland has been active on this issue in the UN Security Council. In my address to the Council on 16 May, I expressed Ireland's deep concern at the plight of children in the occupied Palestinian territory. I highlighted the damage to UNRWA buildings, including schools, during military operations in Gaza, and stressed that all violations against children must end, in particular attacks on schools.

Ireland is a strong supporter of education for Palestinian youth, which is crucial for the long-term economic viability of a Palestinian state. Ireland is a longstanding supporter of UNRWA's delivery of services, including quality education, in the occupied Palestinian territory, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

This year Ireland has provided €7 million in funding to UNRWA, including emergency support for the people in the Gaza Strip in response to the deteriorating humanitarian crisis. I provided €500,000 to UNICEF for the provision of child protection, medical and sanitation ser-

vices to thousands of children in acute need in the West Bank and in Gaza. This included emergency psycho-social services to 5,000 children suffering trauma as a result of the hostilities.

Ireland also supports the work of the Palestinian Ministry of Education, as well as providing additional operational support to partners in the education sphere.

Irish officials will continue to engage actively on the ground and by supporting Israeli and Palestinian civil society partners who play a critical role on this issue.

### **Human Rights**

251. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the State plans to raise the issue of Syrian detainees who have suffered arbitrary and incommunicado detention and enforced disappearance by Syrian Government forces at the UN Security Council during its Presidency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45848/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** There is considerable evidence, including in the most recent report of the United Nation's Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, that tens of thousands of people in Syria have been subject to arbitrary detention or forcible disappearance by government forces in Syria.

Ireland and the EU have repeatedly condemned violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law perpetrated by the Syrian regime and other actors, some of which may constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity.

Ireland has consistently advocated on behalf of the missing and detained in Syria and their families across various international fora including through co-sponsoring multiple resolutions at the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Since taking a seat on the Security Council in January, Ireland has consistently condemned the practice of arbitrary detention and forced disappearance in our statements to Council. We have called for an immediate end to this practice, for the release of detainees, and for accountability for past crimes. We will continue to do so, including during our Presidency of the Council this September.

UN Security Council Resolution 2254 sets the framework for a comprehensive political solution to the Syria conflict, addressing the underlying causes of the conflict and calling for the release of arbitrarily detained persons. Ireland strongly supports UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen and I urge the Syrian government to engage fully with his efforts to find a lasting political solution within the framework set out in Resolution 2254.

*Question No. 252 answered with Question No. 241.*

### **Schools Building Projects**

253. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education the steps she is taking to deliver on her capital building programme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45181/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department has a strong and ambitious rollout of projects under the school building programme to support the operation of the school system particularly in terms of additional capacity requirements.

During the NDP period 2018-2020, there were **526 completed building projects** under the Large Scale Capital Programme and the Additional School Accommodation Scheme. These projects delivered in excess of **48,000 school places**, including permanent accommodation for **229 special classes** and additional capacity for **67 classrooms in 14 special schools** throughout the country.

The Department currently has a significant existing pipeline of projects to be delivered over the coming years to meet capacity needs managed under the Large-Scale Capital Programme (LSCP) and the Additional School Accommodation Scheme (ASA). This includes circa 1,200 school building projects across the various stages of planning, design, tender and construction. There are currently in excess of 250 projects currently at construction, most of which will be completed during Q4 2021 and 2022. and a further 200 school building projects at advanced stages of planning and design.

It is envisaged that 150 - 200 school building project will be completed annually under the NDP.

The current status of projects being delivered is listed on a county by county basis on the *www.Gov.ie* website and is updated on a monthly basis to reflect their progress through the various stages.

The main focus of resources over the last decade and for the coming period is on provision of additional capacity to cater for increasing demographics.

While at a national level, enrolment trends indicate that primary enrolments have passed their peak and that post primary enrolments will peak in the 2024/25 academic year, my Department is very much aware that there are variations to this trend at regional and local level. For that reason, my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and utilises a Geographic Information System, using data from a range of sources, including Child Benefit, school enrolment data and information on residential development activity in order to anticipate school place demand and identify capacity requirement priorities which will necessitate action. This is important in the context of ensuring alignment with the Government's Housing for All Plan.

While much progress has been made to date, the continued modernisation of school facilities will be a priority for my Department under the forthcoming revised NDP to 2030. This increased focus on the upgrade and refurbishment of the existing school stock will be further to the continued increase of school capacity to keep pace with demographic demand including provision for Special Education Needs.

### **Special Educational Needs**

254. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education her views on whether it is acceptable or appropriate under the UNHCR Best Interest of the Child principle or equality that 732 children with special educational needs are without a school place and currently sanctioned for home tuition with some families believing they are hidden away from society and mainstream education; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [36252/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education is a priority for this Government.

The level of investment in special education, at almost €2 billion, is at an all-time high.

An additional 269 additional special classes are being opened this school-year. This will bring the total number of special classes nationally to 2,118. The new classes provide 1,600 additional places, spread right throughout the country.

Two new special schools are also opening this year, one in Dublin and one in Cork.

Despite this unprecedented increase, I am very aware of the need for further specialist education places in a small number of areas, mainly concentrated in Dublin.

I acknowledge that any delay in securing a suitable school placement can cause much anguish for parents and families involved.

Delays can happen for a variety of reasons including, for example, assessment reports for children coming available over the summer period while schools were closed. In other cases, parents may change their preference for a class placement and request that their child move from a mainstream class to a special class.

My Department and the NCSE have therefore put in place new planning structures and procedures to ensure sufficient places become available to meet local need. As new need emerges, there is a cohesive response available to ensure places become available in a timely and targeted way.

Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOS) are working closely with parents and schools to address their needs. My Department will support their work in any way necessary to ensure the required number of school places become available as quickly as possible.

My Department's policy focuses on ensuring that all students with special educational needs can have access to an education appropriate to meeting their needs and abilities.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is responsible, through its network of SENOs, for the development, delivery and co-ordination of education services to children with special educational needs. In circumstances, where the NCSE confirms that no placement is available for a child with special educational needs, my Department can provide Home Tuition grant funding towards the provision of 20 hours home tuition per week as an interim measure until the NCSE confirms that a placement is available. Home tuition funding is not an alternative to a school placement. By its nature it is intended to be a short term intervention.

Where the NCSE has identified an available school placement for a child, the local SENO continues to be available to engage with the family and the school concerned to ensure that the child's needs are addressed.

The Deputy may also be aware that in 2018, the then Minister requested the NCSE to advise on the educational provision that should be in place for students in special schools and classes. Ireland is not alone in considering educational provision for students in special education settings. Many European countries are thinking about the future direction they should take. This is particularly the case in light of new obligations and responsibilities under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

A lot of work has been done and NCSE published a progress report in November, 2019. The report found no evidence to show that one type of special education placement is better than another. It also stated that any decision to move towards greater inclusion would require careful consideration and planning. It is not something that could be achieved in the short term.

Since the publication of the progress report, NCSE has conducted further research and analysis, engaged in a public consultation survey and has received further submissions and expert

inputs. It has also examined the implications arising from the UNCRPD.

Before the advice is finalised, every effort is being made to ensure that NCSE has consulted widely with a view to developing shared understandings on the critical issues involved and proposed solutions.

I expect that the policy advice will be completed before the end of the year.

### **School Facilities**

255. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Education the detail of the current assessment of a school (details supplied) by her Department; and if her Department will now sanction a new school building. [45185/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I wish to confirm that the name of the school to which the Deputy is referring has been clarified and the information provided below relates to the larger primary school in the relevant town.

I can confirm that an Additional Schools Accommodation (ASA) application and First Level Education (FLE) application were assessed in 2019 for the school to which he refers. At that time, there was no deficit of accommodation identified. The school was advised that if their enrolments increase in the future, it was open to the school authority to make a further application.

However, the school has since been identified as a possible candidate for the Energy Pathfinder Programme to undergo extensive fabric upgrades to improve the energy performance of the building and the installation of renewable energy solutions.

As part of the 2022 Pathfinder programme, a number of schools will be chosen in rural and urban areas to undergo extensive fabric upgrades to improve the energy performance of the building and the installation of renewable energy solutions. Each school will be assessed comprehensively to ensure that the measures were suitable for that school and would deliver value to both the school and the pilot. Design teams will be appointed to each project, with medium to deep energy efficiency works delivered.

This Pathfinder programme is paving the way for, and informing, a much larger national schools' programme for the energy retrofit of schools built prior to 2008 as included in the National Development Plan. It is facilitating research on a range of typical retrofit options, which will have been tried and tested. It is providing valuable development information for a solution driven delivery strategy which will be founded on a solid evidence base that has proven the robustness and scalability of renewable solutions within the schools' sector.

My Department has determined that a potential project at the school in question could be of benefit in identifying learnings that can be rolled out in the national programme.

I can confirm that my Department's Professional and Technical staff visited the school recently and carried out a technical inspection. A report is currently being finalised and when this is completed, my Department's officials will contact the school authority directly.

### **School Transport**

256. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Education the recent discussions she has had in relation to the school bus transport system; the funding made available for physical

distancing for post-primary students; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [44228/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The School Transport Scheme is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department. In the 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, were transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who have completed the application and payment process on time for the 2021/22 school year will be accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. In addition all post-primary pupils who are otherwise eligible for school transport but are attending their second nearest school and have applied and paid on time will be accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. This arrangement is in place for current school year pending completion of the full review of the School Transport Scheme.

Children who are not eligible for school transport may apply for transport on a concessionary basis only and are offered seats where capacity exists after all eligible children have been catered for. Late applicants and/or families who pay late are not guaranteed a seat and will only be allocated a seat if capacity is available once seats are allocated to those families who applied and paid on time for transport services for the 2021/2022 school year.

Planning for school transport for the 2021/22 school year has proceeded on the basis that the public health measures in place as schools closed at the end of the last school year would remain as term began in this new school year. This includes the recommendations from Public Health that post-primary services would operate at 50% capacity. All other measures relating to hygiene, pre-assigned seating, cleaning and the wearing of masks by post-primary students are also in place.

However, as the vaccination programme for children on post-primary services is rolled out and as the lifting of restrictions on public transport services proceeds, the capacity limit of 50% on post-primary school transport services will be subject to ongoing review and the Department will be considering the position in this regard over the coming weeks.

My Department reimburses Bus Éireann for a range of costs incurred in the operation and administration of the scheme on a cost recovery basis. Funding is being provided by my Department for the additional buses required so that services can operate at 50% capacity and for the cost of the other required measures.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

257. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education when all State primary and secondary schools will be provided with carbon dioxide monitors; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45753/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Managing ventilation is just one of a suite of public health measures in place to keep our schools safe. Updated guidance for schools on Practical Steps for the Deployment of Good Ventilation Practices in Schools was provided at the end of May following the work of an expert group that carefully considered the role of ventilation in managing COVID-19.

A copy of the guidance is published on the Gov.ie website.

The over-arching approach in the guidance is for schools to have windows open as fully as possible when classrooms are not in use and partially open when classrooms are in use.

The guidance outlines that Carbon Dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) monitors can play a part in providing a useful general indication that areas/rooms may not be adequately ventilated. They can enable occupants to become familiar with the impacts of activities, outdoor weather and window openings on levels of good ventilation.

My Department procured portable monitors that are currently being distributed to schools – between 2 and 20 at primary school level and between 20 and 35 at post-primary school level depending on school size, at an estimated overall cost of €4 million. The monitors are portable, simple to use, and will give a digital reading.

Deliveries of CO<sub>2</sub> monitors to schools commenced in the third week of August. In total, it involves over 35,000 CO<sub>2</sub> monitors being distributed to, primary and post-primary schools. 25,000 CO<sub>2</sub> monitors have been distributed to schools which has facilitated monitors being provided to each school.

96% of primary schools (including all special schools) having received their full allocation of CO<sub>2</sub>. Ten CO<sub>2</sub> monitors have been provided to schools at post-primary level with the balance of their allocation expected to be distributed in October.

### School Staff

258. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Education if a school (details supplied) will be provided with additional teaching staff to deal with the rapid increase in student numbers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45775/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources provided at individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and pupil enrolments on the previous 30 September. The staffing schedule operates in a clear and transparent manner and treats all similar types of schools equally irrespective of location.

The staffing process contains an appeals mechanism for primary schools. The school referred to by the Deputy has been allocated an additional teaching post on appeal, pending confirmation of the school's enrolment on 30th September.

*Question No. 259 answered with Question No. 113.*

*Question No. 260 answered with Question No. 113.*

### School Transport

261. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Education when persons (details supplied) will be facilitated; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45802/21]

**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 the children to whom the Deputy refers are eligible for School Transport. Medical card details for School Transport for the 2021/22 school year were received on 13/07/2021 and then on 10/09/2021, as a result tickets were not initially released as the payment process was not fully completed on time.

Bus Éireann has confirmed that tickets have now been released for the 2021/22 school year.

### **School Staff**

262. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education if the funds will be made available in Budget 2022 to ensure that school secretaries receive a public sector pension entitlement; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45645/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I know from my own experiences that school secretaries and caretakers are valued members of our school communities and my Department is fully aware of the vitally important role played by them in the running of our schools.

The Department previously fully implemented and funded the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator for a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim and officials from the Department and school management bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the issues. On the 27th of October 2020, under the auspices of the WRC, an understanding was agreed on a pathway to progress the issues. Several key strands have been identified, and a phased approach is being taken to the development of proposals.

Following intensive discussions at the WRC on 13th September, there has been significant progress in this dispute. Subject to agreement on all elements of the claim, the Department has offered to move School Secretaries' pay rates to a scale which is aligned with the Clerical Officer Grade III pay scale within education and training boards on a pro rata basis with an effective date of implementation for these new pay arrangements of 1st September 2021. Pay rates will be pro rata according to a secretary's current working pattern. The assimilation of School Secretaries to the CO Grade III pay scale will require further dialogue between the parties and an intensive engagement will take place of over the next two/three weeks to allow this to be finalised.

My Department has also offered to improve the conditions for School Secretaries with re-

gard to sick leave, annual leave and maternity provisions for this cohort of staff. This will take place via direct engagement with the unions in the coming weeks in addition to engagement on other elements of the claim and subject to all elements being agreed.

While there is agreement in principle to take the same approach to the consideration of appropriate pay and conditions of grant funded caretakers there remains a deficit of data on working terms and conditions of such staff. When the final package for secretaries has been agreed and an implementation plan in place for schools and DE, that intensive engagement will begin on regularising the pay and conditions of grant funded caretakers.

I welcome the deferral of the action scheduled for Wednesday 15th September to allow for intensive talks to resume aimed at resolving the claim and agreeing a final package and I encourage all parties to focus on finalising an agreement.

### School Staff

263. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education her views on the provision of public sector pensions to school secretaries and caretakers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45715/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I know from my own experiences that school secretaries and caretakers are valued members of our school communities and my Department is fully aware of the vitally important role played by them in the running of our schools.

The Department previously fully implemented and funded the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator for a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim and officials from the Department and school management bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the issues. On the 27th of October 2020, under the auspices of the WRC, an understanding was agreed on a pathway to progress the issues. Several key strands have been identified, and a phased approach is being taken to the development of proposals.

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My Department has also offered to improve the conditions for School Secretaries with regard to sick leave, annual leave and maternity provisions for this cohort of staff. This will take place via direct engagement with the unions in the coming weeks in addition to engagement on other elements of the claim and subject to all elements being agreed.

While there is agreement in principle to take the same approach to the consideration of appropriate pay and conditions of grant funded caretakers there remains a deficit of data on working terms and conditions of such staff. When the final package for secretaries has been agreed

and an implementation plan in place for schools and DE, that intensive engagement will begin on regularising the pay and conditions of grant funded caretakers.

I welcome the deferral of the action scheduled for Wednesday 15th September to allow for intensive talks to resume aimed at resolving the claim and agreeing a final package and I encourage all parties to focus on finalising an agreement.

### **School Staff**

264. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Education the way rates of pay are set for job-sharing SNAs and teachers who substitute in their own schools; the reason there is disparity in the way that members of staff are paid and who is allowed claim expenses; her plans to address this disparity; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45814/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The provisions related to the Job Sharing Scheme for Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) are outlined in my Department's Circular Letter 41/2014 titled 'Job Sharing Scheme for Special Needs Assistants in Recognised Primary and Post-Primary Schools' and for teachers is contained in Chapter 8 of my Department's Circular Letter Circular 0054/2019 titled 'Leave Schemes for Registered Teachers Employed in Recognised Primary and Post Primary Schools'. In accordance with these circulars, agreed with school management bodies and the relevant trade unions, teachers and SNAs were not permitted to engage in substitute teaching whilst job sharing.

In response to issues raised in relation to supply in schools and the need to minimise movement between schools during the Covid-19 pandemic the restrictions imposed in these circulars have been temporarily suspended for the 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 school years allowing teachers and SNAs to work in a substitute capacity on the days that they are not scheduled to work. This was communicated to the relevant school authorities in Information Notes TC 0016/2021 (Teachers) and 0012/2021 (SNAs), which were agreed with school management bodies and the relevant trade unions.

Paragraph 2 of these circulars sets out the pay arrangements. Job sharing SNAs employed in a substitute capacity will be paid the appropriate substitute daily rate of pay with such substitute work being pensionable and counting towards superannuation. Job sharing teachers employed in a substitute capacity will be paid the personal rate of pay (including personal allowances) with such substitute work also being pensionable and counting towards superannuation.

### **School Transport**

265. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education if a school transport route can be put in place from Mullingar to Columba College, Killucan (details supplied). [45819/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The School Transport Scheme is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department. In the 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, were transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

Under the terms of the Department's Post-Primary School Transport Scheme children are eligible for school transport where they reside not less than 4.8 kilometres from and are attending their nearest school/education centre as determined by my Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

Bus Éireann has advised that pupils residing in the Mullingar area and attending Columba College, Killucan are not eligible for transport as they are not attending their nearest school and are closer to Post Primary schools in Mullingar.

There is currently no service available from Mullingar to Columba College, Killucan.

In cases where the Department is satisfied that the nearest school is full, eligibility for school transport will be determined based on the distance that children reside from their next nearest school having regard to ethos and language. If a family has further information in regard to the closest school being full they should contact School Transport Section of my Department.

### **School Transport**

266. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Education when a bus ticket will be issued to a student (details supplied) who has no other means of travelling to school. [45820/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The School Transport Scheme is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department. In the 2020/2021 school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, were transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

Under the terms of the Department's Post Primary School Transport Scheme children are eligible for school transport where they reside not less than 4.8 kilometres from and are attending their nearest school as determined by my Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

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

Bus Éireann has advised that the pupil referred to by the Deputy is eligible for school transport under the terms of my Department's Post Primary School Transport Scheme. However, the minimum payment required to secure a school transport ticket was not made by the closing date and as a result a ticket was not issued and a refund was processed for the pupil on 15th September 2021.

The service is currently operating at full capacity in line with social distancing requirements.

### **State Examinations**

267. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education the reason a student (details supplied) had their leaving certificate results downgraded so heavily causing them to miss out

on their college course; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45830/21]

**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 Accommodation**

268. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education if she will address a matter regarding school works for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45853/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** There is currently no application for building works in my Department for the school named. My officials have made contact directly with the Deputy in this regard.

The Environmental Protection Agency is a separate entity to the Department of Education.

### **Pupil-Teacher Ratio**

269. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which she is determined to improve pupil-teacher ratios in all primary and second-level schools throughout the country; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45883/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Under the Programme for Government there is a commitment to seek to make further progress in reducing the pupil teacher ratios in primary schools.

Teacher allocations to all schools are approved annually by my Department in accordance with established rules based on recognised pupil enrolment on the previous 30 September. The criteria for the allocation of posts are communicated to school managements annually and are available on the Department website.

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

At post primary level, teachers are currently allocated at a ratio of 19:1 in the free education system and 23:1 to schools in the fee charging sector. Each 1 point adjustment to the pupil teacher ratio at post primary level would result in an additional 1150 teaching posts at an estimated cost of approx. €56.5m per annum.

Any further improvement will have to be considered in the context of the annual budgetary process.

## Pupil-Teacher Ratio

270. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the locations throughout Ireland most acutely affected by higher class sizes and disadvantageous pupil-teacher ratios at primary and second-level; her ongoing plans to address these issues; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45884/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Please find attached the 2020-21, the latest available data, pupil-teacher ratios for primary and post primary by county as well as the average class size by county for primary.

We are currently unable to calculate class size at post primary due to the difficulty of recording discrete class sizes where pupils have different subject choices and subject levels available to them.

Under the Programme for Government there is a commitment to seek to make further progress in reducing the pupil teacher ratios in primary schools.

At primary level, the annual staffing schedule determines the allocation of teachers to schools. Budget 2021 implemented a further 1 point reduction for the 2021/22 school year so that primary schools are allocated teaching posts on an average basis of 1 classroom teacher for every 25 pupils which has brought the teacher allocation ratio in all primary schools to the lowest ever seen at primary level. In addition, there has been a three point reduction in the retention schedule, which will assist schools that would otherwise be at risk of losing teaching posts. Lower thresholds apply to DEIS Urban Band 1 schools. At post primary level, teachers are currently allocated at a ratio of 19:1 in the free education system and 23:1 to schools in the fee charging sector. Any further improvement will have to be considered in the context of the annual budgetary process.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-09-23\_pq270-23-09-21\_en.xlsx">Data</a>]

## Special Educational Needs

271. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which adequate special needs classes continue to be made available in all primary and second-level schools throughout Ireland; the areas in which difficulties have arisen; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45885/21]

273. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education if she anticipates any particular measures to address areas in which a particular shortage of suitable special needs places has arisen in primary and second-level schools throughout Ireland; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45887/21]

275. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which the number of school places catering for children with autism continues to be made available at primary and second-level schools throughout Ireland; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45889/21]

278. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the degree to which special needs schools at primary or second-level continue to progress towards the provision of extra or new facilities at the various locations previously identified; the extent to which each project has been impacted by Covid-19, the proposals to address issues arising; and if she will

make a statement on the matter. [45892/21]

282. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which she continues to engage with the school authorities in special needs schools throughout County Kildare with a view to meeting accommodation or other requirements; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45896/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 271, 273, 275, 278 and 282 together.

It is my belief that children with special educational needs should receive their education in placements which are appropriate to their needs alongside their peers wherever possible unless such an approach would be inconsistent with the best interests of the individual child or other children in the school.

This approach is consistent with the provisions of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004.

My Department's policy is therefore to provide for the inclusive education of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools. The majority of children with special needs attend mainstream education with additional supports.

Only where it has been assessed that the child is unable to be supported in mainstream education, are special class placements or special school placements recommended and provided for.

It is therefore not the case that special educational placements are required to support all children with special educational needs, nor is it intended that this should be the case

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide. It has well established structures in place for engaging with schools and parents. NCSE seeks to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all children who have been identified as needing special education placements.

The Deputy will be aware that the level of investment in special education, at almost €2 billion, is at an all-time high.

An additional 269 special classes are being opened this school-year. This will bring the total number of special classes nationally to 2,118. The new classes provide 1,600 additional places, spread right throughout the country.

Two new special schools are also opening this year, one in Dublin and one in Cork.

Despite this unprecedented increase, I am very aware of the need for further specialist education places in a small number of areas, mainly concentrated in Dublin.

I acknowledge that any delay in securing a suitable school placement can cause much anguish for parents and families involved.

Delays can happen for a variety of reasons including, for example, assessment reports for children coming available over the summer period while schools were closed. In other cases, parents may change their preference for a class placement and request that their child move from a mainstream class to a special class.

My Department and the NCSE have therefore put in place new planning structures and pro-

cedures to ensure sufficient places become available to meet local need. As new need emerges, there is a cohesive response available to ensure places become available in a timely and targeted way.

The willingness of school communities to open special classes is central to ensuring that every child can obtain a suitable placement. My Department and the NCSE can provide the necessary funding, teaching and SNA resources, professional supports and training so that the required special class places can be provided as soon as possible.

Information on the list of schools with special classes, the types and locations of these classes is published on the NCSE website and is available at [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie)

In respect of the Kildare area six new special classes opened in September 2021, four at primary and two at post primary level.

In the case of all new schools, it is general practice to include a Special Education Needs (SEN) Base in the accommodation brief for new school buildings, unless local circumstances indicate that it will not be required. Typically, a two classroom SEN Base is provided in new primary schools and a two or four classroom SEN Base is provided in new post primary schools.

Additionally, when the NCSE sanction a special class in a school, the school can apply to the Department for capital funding to re-configure existing spaces within the school building to accommodate the class and/or to construct additional accommodation. Similarly, where special schools wish to expand provision, the school can apply to the Department for capital funding to accommodate additional placements.

The main focus of the Department's capital resources over the last decade and for the coming period, under the National Development Plan, is on provision of additional capacity to cater for increasing demographics, including provision for Special Education Needs.

Within County Kildare 17 projects were completed in the period 2018-2020; 13 of those were primary schools including one special school. There were four post-primary school building projects. As part of these projects, 9 SEN classrooms were provided at primary level and 36 SEN pupil places at post-primary level.

There are a further 12 projects currently on site in the county. Of these seven are primary schools and five are post-primary schools. In terms of SEN provision, these will provide for seven SEN classrooms (primary level) and 48 SEN pupil places (post-primary level).

Additionally, there are 38 projects at planning stage. The estimated SEN provision to be delivered by these projects is 77 SEN classrooms at primary level and 136 SEN pupil places at post-primary level.

The current status of all building projects, including in County Kildare, is available on my Department website [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie) and this information will continue to be updated on a regular basis.

I can reassure the Deputy that the local Special Education Needs Organisers (SENOs) continue to be available to assist and advise both schools and the parents of children with special educational needs.

Parents may contact SENOs directly using the contact details available at: [ncse.ie/regional-services-contact-list](http://ncse.ie/regional-services-contact-list).

## **School Transport**

272. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the degree to which school transport issues continue to arise throughout Ireland; the extent to which she continues to move to resolve such issues; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45886/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the 2020/21 year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

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 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 102,420 pupils, including 54,018 post primary eligible pupils and 14,143 post primary concessionary pupils have been issued tickets for the School Transport Scheme. This number is changing as tickets continue to be allocated to pupils.

As you may be aware, 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.

*Question No. 273 answered with Question No. 271.*

## Schools Building Projects

274. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which various school building projects throughout the country have been able to progress throughout the Covid-19 downturn; the locations of any particular difficulties in this regard; the proposed or ongoing action to address such issues; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45888/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department has a large-scale and ambitious roll-out of school building projects under the National Development Plan and as part of Project Ireland 2040. The continuation of construction work on school building projects during lockdown period in early 2021 was an important enabler to facilitating the delivery of our school building programme.

During the NDP period 2018-2020, there were **526 completed building projects** under the Large Scale Capital Programme (LSCP) and the Additional School Accommodation Scheme (ASA). These projects delivered in excess of **48,000 school places**, including permanent accommodation for **229 special classes**; and additional capacity for **67 classrooms in 14 special schools** throughout the country. There are also currently some 250 school building projects on site many of which will be completed in 2022.

My Department is aware of the challenges of Covid and the challenging market conditions currently underway and is working proactively to ensure that all school building contracts are awarded as expeditiously as possible, while working within the parameters set by the Office of Government Procurement and principles of public procurement set out at both national and EU level.

My Department works closely with design teams on school projects to permit reasonable additional time for tenderers to submit tenders, allowing them ample time to price appropriately given the current market.

Where the tender closing date has already passed, and the lowest tenderer advises the Department that they can no longer stand over their tender and are withdrawing from the tender process, the design team are authorised to proceed to processing the next lowest tender until such point as a tenderer agrees to stand over their tender thus ensuring the progression of all projects in the pipeline.

Once contracts are awarded, any variations to the contract sum must be addressed within the standard provisions of the Public Works Contracts.

*Question No. 275 answered with Question No. 271.*

## Schools Building Projects

276. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which she has agreed to provide new second-level schools at precise locations throughout north County Kildare; the extent to which such works are in hand or ongoing; the schedule for the projects concerned; the extent to which any such projects in terms of construction or planning have been impacted by Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45890/21]

277. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which she has agreed to provide new primary schools at precise locations throughout north County Kildare; the extent to which such works are in hand or ongoing; the schedule for the projects concerned; the extent to which any such projects in terms of construction or planning have been

impacted by Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45891/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 276 and 277 together.

My Department continuously monitors demographic growth in order to ensure that sufficient school places are available and the requirement to provide new schools is generally driven by demographic pressures arising from development.

Two new primary schools were established in the North Kildare area in 2019, one under the patronage of Educate Together opened in Leixlip and a gaelscoil, under the patronage of An Foras Pátrúnachta opened in Maynooth. A further primary school has been announced for Naas and the establishment date will take account of the demographic position and roll-out of planned additional housing. A post-primary school, Gaelcholáiste Mhaigh Nuad, was established in 2020 and a further post primary school was established in Enfield in 2020 which will also cater for demand from North Kildare.

In North Kildare, there are a number of different areas which are likely to experience growth. These include Maynooth, Leixlip, Kilcock and Celbridge. My Department is engaging with planning (local) authorities with a view to ensuring that suitable school sites are zoned in the individual settlements should they be necessary to meet projected needs. The main focus of my Department's capital resources over the last decade and for the coming period, under the NDP, is on provision of additional capacity to cater for increasing demographics, including provision for Special Education Needs.

Under Project Ireland 2040, during the NDP period 2018-2020, there were **526 completed building projects** under the Large Scale Capital Programme (LSCP) and the Additional School Accommodation Scheme (ASA). These projects delivered in excess of **48,000 school places**, including permanent accommodation for **229 special classes**; and additional capacity for **67 classrooms in 14 special schools** throughout the country.

Of the **526** school building projects completed in 2018-2020, **16** of these projects delivered were in County Kildare; **13** of those were primary schools including one special school. There were **3** post-primary school building projects.

A further 13 projects are currently on site, eight at primary level and five at post primary. 34 projects are at various stages of planning and design.

The current status of these projects being delivered is listed on a county by county basis on [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie) and is updated on a monthly basis to reflect their progress through the various stages.

From 2018 to date, there has been €179m in capital funding (including Minor Works Grants) issued from my Department in respect of school capital grants and school building projects in Co. Kildare. €38m during 2021 to date and a further €141m across 2018, 2019 and 2020.

My Department is aware of the challenges of Covid and the challenging market conditions currently underway and is working proactively to ensure that all school building contracts are awarded as expeditiously as possible, while working within the parameters set by the Office of Government Procurement and principles of public procurement set out at both national and EU level.

*Question No. 277 answered with Question No. 276.*

### Pupil-Teacher Ratio

279. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which larger class sizes and disadvantageous pupil-teacher ratios are evident at primary and second-level throughout north County Kildare; the extent of her proposals to address such issues in the short and medium term; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45893/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The average class size for schools in North Kildare is 25.4 based on mainstream pupils in mainstream classes, table attached.

	Mainstream Pupils	Mainstream Classes	Mainstream Class
Constituency	Enrolment per Return 2020/21	Count Class 2020/21	Average Class Size
Kildare North	16025	632	25.4

We are currently unable to calculate class size at post primary due to the difficulty of recording discrete class sizes where pupils have different subject choices and subject levels available to them.

The primary pupil-teacher ratio including all pupils/posts in mainstream schools in Kildare North is 17.334.

The post-primary pupil-teacher ratio for the 16 post-primary schools in Kildare North is 13.519.

Under the Programme for Government there is a commitment to seek to make further progress in reducing the pupil teacher ratios in primary schools.

At primary level, the annual staffing schedule determines the allocation of teachers to schools. Budget 2021 implemented a further 1 point reduction for the 2021/22 school year so that primary schools are allocated teaching posts on an average basis of 1 classroom teacher for every 25 pupils which has brought the teacher allocation ratio in all primary schools to the lowest ever seen at primary level. In addition, there has been a three point reduction in the retention schedule, which will assist schools that would otherwise be at risk of losing teaching posts. Lower thresholds apply to DEIS Urban Band 1 schools. At post primary level, teachers are currently allocated at a ratio of 19:1 in the free education system and 23:1 to schools in the fee charging sector. Any further improvement will have to be considered in the context of the annual budgetary process.

### Early Childhood Care and Education

280. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which adequate provision for early years education remains an integral part of her Department's objectives; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45894/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) is responsible for early years education outside the formal education system. However, my Department has a key role in supporting quality within the sector and works closely with the DCEDIY.

My Department's main intervention in the provision of early years education is the Early Start programme and the Rutland Street Project. The Early Start programme was established in 1994, and is a one-year intervention to meet the needs of children aged between 3 years and 5 years who are at risk of not reaching their potential within the school system. It involves an educational programme to enhance overall development, help prevent school failure and offset the effects of social disadvantage. The Early Start programme runs in 40 primary schools in designated areas of urban disadvantage, and has capacity for 1,620 children each year. Early Start units are staffed by teachers and child care workers, and the role of the child care workers is to meet the care needs of all the children in the unit, including those children with special educational needs. The programme opens each year to new child enrolments. The Rutland Street Project was established in 1969 and informed many of the approaches to Early Start. It is supported by the Department of Education and provides 103 places for preschool-aged children including an ASD Early Intervention Unit/Special Class.

Since the inception of Early Start, the early childhood education and care landscape has changed significantly with the introduction of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme in 2010, and the extension of this scheme to a two-year programme in 2018. In the 2019/20 programme year over 105,000 children were supported in the ECCE scheme. The ECCE scheme is under the remit of my colleague the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and officials of my Department and its agencies co-operate closely with that Department, particularly in relation to *Siolta* and *Aistear*, the national quality and curriculum frameworks for early childhood education.

My Department also plays a key role in the ongoing development of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) which was launched in June 2016 by the DCEDIY. AIM is a model of supports designed to ensure that children with disabilities can access the ECCE scheme. AIM supports are provided through the ECCE scheme. The main supports are grouped into universal or targeted supports. Where universal supports are not enough to meet the needs of an individual child, targeted supports are available to ensure the child can meaningfully participate in pre-school.

My Department has made provision for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) classes for children of pre-school age for whom places aren't available from providers of the ECCE scheme. These classes are attached to mainstream schools. There are currently 132 of these ASD classes across the country providing targeted supports for 695 pupils. Moreover, where places in those classes are not currently available to pupils my Department provides Home Tuition grants to enable access to pre-school education for those children. In the last school year there were 522 pre-school children being supported by the Home Tuition scheme.

The Department of Education Inspectorate has an oversight role regarding the quality of education provision for children and young people aged from 0 to 18 years. The quality improvement agenda has been further supported by the introduction of education-focused inspections in Early Learning and Care settings delivering the ECCE programme of free preschool since 2015. The first early years education-focused inspection (EYEI) reports were published in June 2016 on the Department of Education website. To date over 2,600 EYEIs have been completed in a diverse range of early years settings nationally. The Inspectorate evaluates the quality of the nature, range and appropriateness of the early educational experiences for children participating in the ECCE programme. In 2019, *First Five, a Whole of Government Strategy for Babies Young Children and their Families* was published including a range of commitments by my Department to improve the quality of early childhood education provision and practice. This includes the extension of education-focused inspection of all state-funded ELC provision for children from birth. Roll-out of EYEI birth – six inspections will commence in 2022.

## School Accommodation

281. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which her Department continues to identify and replace deficient or obsolete school accommodation in all areas throughout Ireland with a view to replacement; the extent of any such programme at present; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45895/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** As the Deputy will be aware, my Department has a strong and ambitious rollout of projects under the school building programme to support the operation of the school system.

During the NDP period 2018-2020, there were 526 completed building projects under the Large Scale Capital Programme and the Additional School Accommodation Scheme. These projects delivered in excess of 48,000 school places, including permanent accommodation for 229 special classes and additional capacity for 67 classrooms in 14 special schools throughout the country.

The main focus of resources over the last decade and for the coming period is on provision of additional capacity to cater for increasing demographics and for Special Education Needs accommodation. Nevertheless my Department has also been taking an integrated approach to the replacement of prefabricated units as part of large-scale and devolved projects, or as part of new projects approved under the Additional School Accommodation scheme.

While much progress has been made to date, the continued modernisation of school facilities, including the upgrade and refurbishment of existing school stock, will be a priority for my Department under the forthcoming revised NDP to 2030.

*Question No. 282 answered with Question No. 271.*

## Special Educational Needs

283. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which she remains satisfied regarding the adequacy of the number of special needs teachers and SNAs in all primary and second-level schools throughout County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45897/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I wish to advise the Deputy that DES Circular 0013/2017 for primary schools and 0014/2017 for post primary schools set out the details of the model for allocating special education teachers to schools. DES Circulars 007 and 008 of 2019 set out how the allocations for schools were updated from September 2019.

The Special Education Teacher allocation process provides a single unified allocation for special educational support teaching needs to each school, based on each school's educational profile. Under the allocation model, schools are provided with a total allocation for special education needs support based on their school profile. The provision of a profiled allocation is designed to give a fairer allocation for each school which recognises that all schools need an allocation for special needs support, but which provides a graduated allocation which takes into account the actual level of need in each school.

Under the allocation model, schools are frontloaded with resources based on each school's profile to provide supports immediately to those pupils who need it without delay. This reduces the administrative burden on schools as schools no longer have to complete an application

process annually and apply for newly enrolled pupils who require resource hours. Children who need support can have that support provided immediately rather than having to obtain a diagnosis.

The total number of SETs has increased by 39% since 2011, from 9,740 at that time, to over 13,600 at present.

Budget 2021 provided for an additional 990 additional Special Needs Assistants (SNA) posts for allocation to schools, bringing the total numbers to 18,000 by the end of December 2021. This allocation of SNAs is to meet the care needs of pupils in 2021 and will enable the establishment of new special classes, creation of new places in special schools, support children in mainstream classes and the transition to the new allocation model for the 2021/22 school year.

The Budget 2021 increase to 18,000 SNAs posts represents an increase of increase of 70% in the number of SNAs provided since 2011 at which point 10,575 SNAs were available.

The NCSE has published statistical information regarding SNA allocations for all schools which can be accessed on the NCSE website at [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie) or by using the following link [ncse.ie/statistics](http://www.ncse.ie/statistics).

I am satisfied that the very significant levels of additional provision we have made in recent years, and for 2021, to provide Special Education Teachers and Special Needs Assistants, means that all schools can be sufficiently resourced to provide for the special educational needs and care needs of children in their schools.

### **Schools Building Projects**

284. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the progress in regard to the provision of a Gaelcholáiste in north County Kildare; the extent to which the project is evolving; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45898/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** As the Deputy may be aware, my Department has given approval to the Patron of the school in question to appoint a consultant to undertake an Options Study of the proposed property to meet the school's permanent accommodation needs. This Study, when available, will be used as a basis for determining the necessary refurbishment works required to the property.

In the interim, my Department has approved funding to the patron to undertake refurbishment works in the property to facilitate the school's access to additional specialist accommodation. The project has been devolved to the patron for delivery.

### **School Accommodation**

285. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which accommodation requirements at primary and second-level schools in Kilcock, County Kildare continues to be met; her plans for the future in this regard; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45899/21]

286. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which accommodation requirements at primary and second-level schools in Naas, County Kildare continue to be met; her plans for the future in this regard; and if she will make a statement on

the matter. [45900/21]

287. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which accommodation requirements at primary and second-level schools in Clane, County Kildare continue to be met; her plans for the future in this regard; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45901/21]

288. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which accommodation requirements at primary and second-level schools in Prosperous, County Kildare continue to be met; her plans for the future in this regard; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45902/21]

289. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which accommodation requirements at primary and second-level schools in Leixlip, County Kildare continue to be met; her plans for the future in this regard; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45903/21]

290. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which accommodation requirements at primary and second-level schools in Celbridge, County Kildare continue to be met; her plans for the future in this regard; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45904/21]

291. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which accommodation requirements at primary and second-level schools in Sallins, County Kildare continue to be met; her plans for the future in this regard; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45905/21]

292. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which accommodation requirements at primary and second-level schools in Maynooth, County Kildare continue to be met; her plans for the future in this regard; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45906/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 285 to 292, inclusive, together.

My Department has a strong and ambitious rollout of projects under the school building programme to support the operation of the school system particularly in terms of additional capacity requirements.

During the NDP period 2018-2020, there were **526 completed building projects** under the Large Scale Capital Programme and the Additional School Accommodation Scheme. These projects delivered in excess of **48,000 school places**, including permanent accommodation for **229 special classes** and additional capacity for **67 classrooms in 14 special schools** throughout the country.

There are also currently some 250 school building projects on site many of which will be completed in 2022.

The main focus of resources over the last decade and for the coming period is on provision of additional capacity to cater for increasing demographics.

While at a national level, enrolment trends indicate that primary enrolments have passed their peak and that post primary enrolments will peak in the 2024/25 academic year, my Department is very much aware that there are variations to this trend at regional and local level. For that reason, my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and utilises a

Geographic Information System, using data from a range of sources, including Child Benefit, school enrolment data and information on residential development activity in order to anticipate school place demand and identify capacity requirement priorities which will necessitate action. This is important in the context of ensuring alignment with the Government's Housing for All Plan.

While much progress has been made to date, the continued modernisation of school facilities will be a priority for my Department under the forthcoming revised NDP to 2030. This increased focus on the upgrade and refurbishment of the existing school stock will be further to the continued increase of school capacity to keep pace with demographic demand including provision for Special Education Needs.

The current status of all building projects, including those in County Kildare is available on my Department website [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie) and this information will continue to be updated on a regular basis.

*Question No. 286 answered with Question No. 285.*

*Question No. 287 answered with Question No. 285.*

*Question No. 288 answered with Question No. 285.*

*Question No. 289 answered with Question No. 285.*

*Question No. 290 answered with Question No. 285.*

*Question No. 291 answered with Question No. 285.*

*Question No. 292 answered with Question No. 285.*

### **School Funding**

293. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education if she will allocate €10 per primary school child for schools to buy books for their libraries including audiobooks and picturebooks; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45930/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The annual estimated cost of allocating €10 per pupil to fund library books in primary schools would be circa €5.4 million.

An arrangement was made through An Chomhairle Leabharlanna in 1971, whereby the local authority librarians would provide services for schools. At that time my Department made a grant available for this purpose based on the number of pupils enrolled in primary schools in the local authority areas.

The amount of the grant payable to each local authority was based on the number of primary pupils in the relevant area and amounted to €4.52 per pupil. The full year estimated cost of reinstating the library grant is circa €2.5m.

As Minister for Education and Skills I am very conscious of the importance of library services and the value of these in the context of the supports available to schools.

As the Deputies may be aware, local libraries provide a wide range of resources and activities which support Primary schools in developing children's literacy, numeracy, creativity and communication skills

However, responsibility for the support and provision of library services rests with my colleague, Heather Humphreys, TD Minister for Rural and Community Development.

### **School Curriculum**

294. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education if she will that ensure schools provide suitable alternative educational activities for students who have opted out of religion class; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45931/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Under Article 44 of the Constitution and in accordance with Section 30 of the Education Act, 1998, parents have a right to have their children opt out of religious instruction classes if they so wish.

Under the provisions of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018, all schools are required, where schools provide religious instruction that they clearly set out in their admission policies the school's arrangements for students, where the parent or in the case of a student who has reached the age of 18 years, the student, has requested that the student attend the school without attending religious instruction in the school.

The manner in which any school ensures that the right to opt out of religion instruction classes is upheld is a matter for the school concerned. Each individual school must determine the particular arrangements which are most appropriate in its individual circumstances having regard to local issues such as available space, supervision requirements and how the school concerned organises classes etc.

### **Housing Schemes**

295. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason a reduced fee for birth certificates provided to organisations for disadvantaged and socially excluded persons such as an organisation (details supplied) on behalf of housing applicants has ceased. [45817/21]

296. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reasons local authority housing applicants must continue to provide birth certificates with their applications in view of the fact that social protection applicants do not have to produce birth certificates because her Department can access them itself; and if she will give consideration to enabling local authorities to access birth certificate information upon the request of a housing applicant given the limited financial means of many applicants. [45818/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 295 and 296 together.

The requirements to provide birth certificates to access housing supports is a matter for each local authority. Arrangements are already in place between Local Authorities and the Department of Social Protection to enable information, including birth information, to be made available to enable applications to be processed.

I understand that my Department, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and the Local Government Management Agency are currently working to extend these data-sharing systems to facilitate the verification of birth and other information across agencies without the need for applicants to provide documentary evidence of age and to therefore remove the requirement for the production of a birth certificate.

The Civil Registration Act 2004, as amended, provides for the Minister for Social Protection to prescribe the fees for certificates and services provided by the Civil Registration Services. The current scheme does not provide for reduced fees for certificates required for housing applicants.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

*Question No. 296 answered with Question No. 295.*

### **Social Welfare Benefits**

297. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the way the pandemic unemployment payment will be treated when it comes to calculating jobseeker's benefit for individuals in 2023, relating to pay and weeks worked in 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45829/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Jobseekers Benefit is a social insurance based statutory income support provided by the Department for people who are covered by PRSI paid contributions and satisfy the other qualifying conditions of the scheme.

The Social Welfare (Covid-19) (Amendment) Act 2020 provides for the attribution of social insurance contributions to insured persons who were beneficiaries of the pandemic unemployment payment (PUP). This provision ensures that employees entitled to and in receipt of PUP will have social insurance contributions attributed to them at the same value as they were paying while employed immediately before going on to the payment. The measure means that people who lost their jobs arising from the Covid-19 pandemic will not be disadvantaged in accessing social insurance benefits in the future.

The rate of payment for Jobseekers Benefit is graduated according to a person's average weekly earnings in the GCY, which is the second last complete tax year before the year in which the claim is made. The GCY for claims made in the current year is 2019 and for claims made in 2023 will be 2021.

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

### **Rural Schemes**

298. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the six year limit will be removed from the rural social scheme (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45833/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** The Rural Social Scheme (RSS) is an income support scheme providing part-time employment opportunities for farmers or fishers in receipt of certain social welfare payments, and who are underemployed in their primary occupation, within their local area, in community and voluntary organisations.

RSS is specifically designed and delivered to certain qualified people of working age whose income falls below certain limits. The valuable work undertaken by participants draws on their existing skills which may be further developed and shared throughout their participation.

During 2017 and 2018 the number of places funded on RSS was increased by 750, bring-

ing the total number of places available to 3,350. A six-year time limit was also introduced for new RSS participants with effect from February 2017 that only applies to new entrants onto the scheme after that date. Prior to the introduction of the six year time limit, an RSS participant could remain on the RSS scheme for a significant part of their working life. This had the effect of limiting turnover of places on RSS and thereby reducing the opportunities for new entrants.

The first cohort of participants that will leave RSS on the basis of the 6-year rule will not arise until February, 2023. The Department continually monitors all of its employment support programmes and intends to complete a review of RSS in 2022.

### **Employment Support Services**

299. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the terms of the new regional model proposed to replace local employment services will be reviewed in view of considerable fears of contracts being unviable and other identified flaws in the model that could see a disincentive for service providers to prioritise long-term unemployed persons with assistance; her views on the fact that rewarding progression into employment only is too narrow a measurement of progress; if her attention has been drawn to the value of walk-in services under local employment schemes and is of the view that the loss of this element of the service would be regressive; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45834/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department is currently at an advanced stage of the first phase of procuring new employment services. This phase involves the procurement of employment services for seven counties in the Midlands and North-West across four lots. These counties do not have an existing local employment service and represent the first phase of an expansion of employment services.

The funding approach for the new service awards approximately ninety percent of fees to providers when clients commence their engagement and agree their personal progression plan. The latter requires a tailored approach for each client and can contain progression towards employment, which may involve participation on relevant education, training or other programmes.

Phase two will take on board the learnings of the first phase and apply these to subsequent Requests for Tenders that will expand this model throughout the rest of the State. This is a significant expansion of employment services and will result in State-wide coverage of employment services for those furthest from the labour market for the first time.

In relation to walk-ins, my Department has always supported engagements with clients who are not on a jobseeker's payment. The new model will continue to support engagement with these clients. Under the RES model, they will also benefit from an assessment from an Intreo case officer as to the most appropriate service for each client depending on their individual needs and requirements.

I understand and appreciate the concerns in the sector at the changes to the Local Employment Service model. However, existing service providers with a strong track record and a willingness to cooperate with others in the sector, will be well-placed to submit high-quality tenders for the new services. The new model and its associated procurement process is accessible to the community and voluntary sectors, including through lower financial requirements and a significant emphasis on service quality. Phase two will take on board the learnings from the phase one procurement.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

## **Social Welfare Appeals**

300. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on a review of further medical evidence submitted for an illness benefit review in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45861/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The person concerned attended an in person medical assessment on the 25th August 2021 to have her continued entitlement to claim Illness Benefit reviewed.

It was the Medical Assessor's opinion that she was capable of work. A letter issued to her on the 8th September 2021, affording her the opportunity to provide any further medical evidence she believed was relevant to her case before a formal decision was made on her claim by a Deciding Officer.

The Department received further medical evidence from the person concerned on the 17th September 2021. Upon reviewing the Medical Assessor's report and all the information provided by the person concerned, it was the Deciding Officer's decision that the person concerned is capable of work and as such is not entitled to continue claiming Illness Benefit from the 27th September 2021.

A decision letter issued to the person concerned on the 20th September 2021 informing her of this decision. This letter gives her the right to have this decision internally reviewed by a Deciding Officer from the Department or to appeal the decision to the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

## **Social Welfare Code**

301. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will consider an increase in the qualified adult allowance to allow for the additional weekly payment of €10 for those qualified adults over 80 years of age; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45911/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The over 80 allowance is an increase of €10 per week on the basic pension rate, which is automatically awarded to qualified pensioners on attaining 80 years of age. Only one such allowance is payable in respect of each pension.

An Increase for a Qualified Adult (IQA) is paid, generally, where a pensioner has an adult dependent (e.g., a spouse, civil partner or cohabitant who is financially dependent upon him/her), who does not have enough contributions to claim a maximum rate State Pension (Contributory) in his/her own right.

The maximum rate of an IQA for someone over 66 is €222.50, and so in most cases where it is claimed, such couples have additional income or means above their State Pension payments, as otherwise they would obtain a higher payment through the Qualified Adult claiming a State Pension (Non-Contributory) (SPNC).

The SPNC is subject to a household means-test, and has a maximum personal rate of €237 weekly (plus additional allowances, such as the over-80 allowance, where applicable). Where

household means result in this payment being reduced (because, for example, the spouse in receipt of the State Pension also has a significant occupational pension), the other spouse may instead claim the IQA, the means test of which is based on his/her own means instead. In such cases, the Qualified Adult can choose the payment which is most beneficial to him/her.

If a person over 80 is in receipt of an IQA and has only limited household means, s/he may claim the State Pension (Non-Contributory), and if that payment is more beneficial, s/he will be paid under that scheme.

The current rate of payment in respect of qualified adults reflects the economies of scale faced by a two-adult household compared to those of a one-adult household. Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) research has found that the minimum needs of the adults in a couple headed household cost 1.5 times (rather than twice) that of an equivalent one adult headed household with children. This finding was backed up by similar research in other countries which have carried out research into minimum budget standards.

Any changes to the proportionate rates of payments for qualified adults would need to be considered in an overall budgetary and policy context.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Legislative Measures**

302. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if there are plans to remove the requirement of a court order to allow a person access their files as per section 88 of the Adoption Act 2010 for adoptees who have already met their birth mother; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45789/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Heads of the Birth Information and Tracing Bill were published in May of this year and the pre-legislative scrutiny process is currently taking place. I have been invited to appear before the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on 28th September 2021.

The detailed drafting of the Bill is continuing at pace and that includes a determination of any consequential amendments that are required to the Adoption Acts in order to achieve the policy aims of the proposed Bill. Any amendment to Section 88 will be considered in that context.

### **Third Level Fees**

303. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if a review of the college fees can be carried out in relation to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45858/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The fee payable by a student can vary depending on a variety of factors including the type of course and the student’s access route including previous education.

Higher education institutions are responsible for the assessment of student applications to study and responsible for determining the appropriate fee rates payable by a student. In this regard my department does not have a role in assessing individual student applications or deter-

mining the rate of tuition fee payable.

Where a student wishes to raise a query in relation to the fee rates determined by a higher education institution the matters should be raised with the institution attended.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

304. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his Department has engaged with universities and colleges on the use of Covid-19 antigen testing in third-level institutions; the plans that are in place for the roll-out of antigen testing on college campuses; the timeline for any such roll-out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45913/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The Government's intention is to strengthen the prevention and intervention measures around COVID-19 in response to the changing context including surveillance, track and trace, and potential use of new technology. My Department recognises the potential role of rapid antigen testing as one part of a package of surveillance and vigilance measures that could also include self-monitoring and other public health non-pharmaceutical interventions.

Following the establishment by the Minister for Health of an Expert Advisory Group on Rapid Testing, my Department wrote to the Group outlining steps already taken to pilot rapid testing initiatives in the further and higher education sector. My Department has requested the Group's early advice in determining the appropriate role for rapid testing and parameters around its usage in higher and further education settings

Recent advice published by HIQA sets out the need to be prepared for any future mass testing programme for asymptomatic people.

Among the steps already taken to prepare the sector is the provision of support for an SFI-backed research project entitled 'Multi-site study to develop a SARS-CoV-2 Infection Surveillance System for Third Level Students and Staff in the Republic of Ireland', known as UniCoV. This study began on June 14 across four universities. It is expected that the study, comprising approximately 8000 staff and students, will provide valuable learning on the potential role rapid antigen testing can take in this sector.

My Department has also joined a HSE-led Pilot Project Working Group to pilot approaches for the operation of rapid testing in education settings. The purpose of these pilots is to examine the acceptability of the tests for individuals and the sites – i.e. can the site manage the process, do staff and students sign up and do they stick with it, do the tests pick up any positive cases and what, if any, are the unintended consequences. Secondary to this feasibility aspect is, following the pilots, determining whether the model is scalable and if so, what changes would need to be made to the process and what additional resources would be required.

These pilots have commenced and five further and higher education sites are participating in the study. My Department is supportive of HSE proposals to expand these pilot studies to further locations in the coming period and a number of new sites will commence pilot studies shortly. The findings of these pilots with regard to feasibility and implementation will inform planning and preparation for any wider scheme, in line with HIQA's advice.

### **Student Accommodation**

305. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will report on the most recent meeting of the Working Group on Student Accommodation; the details of the immediate supports planned to tackle the student accommodation crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45926/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The Interdepartmental Working Group on Student Accommodation last met on 30th June. The key issues discussed were the progress made on actions outlined in the National Student Accommodation Strategy, and a discussion of the planned Residential Tenancies (No.2) Act and its impact on student accommodation.

The Act was subsequently passed on July 9th. It restricts the up-front payments required to secure accommodation, including student accommodation, to no more than the equivalent of two months' rent, and limit payments thereafter to one month's rent at a time.

Housing For All, the Government's recently announced plan for housing, contains a commitment to support technological universities to develop purpose-built student accommodation where such a requirement exists, through access to appropriate financing, and a specific action in relation to legislating to allow for Technological Universities to borrow from the Housing Finance Agency. My officials and I will continue to work with colleagues in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to advance this.

### **Student Accommodation**

306. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the steps he is taking to respond to the shortage of student accommodation. [45932/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The National Student Accommodation Strategy is designed to ensure that there is an increased level of supply of purpose built student accommodation to reduce the demand for accommodation in the private rental sector by both domestic and international students attending our Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Several of the actions in this strategy centre around ensuring that HEIs have access to low-cost financing in order to support their building of student accommodation.

One of these actions involved the introduction of legislation to empower the Housing Finance Agency (HFA) to lend directly to HEIs for the development of student accommodation. This legislation was commenced in 2017, and so far three universities - TCD, UCC and UCD have had a total of €157 million in loans approved by the HFA, which will provide more than 1,400 new student bed spaces.

In June I, along with my colleagues the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, announced that €75 million of financing had been successfully sourced for the Council of Europe Bank for the building of student accommodation in universities.

Housing For All, the Government's recently announce plan for housing, contains a commitment to support technological universities to develop purpose-built student accommodation where such a requirement exists, through access to appropriate financing, and a specific action in relation to legislating to allow for Technological Universities to borrow from the Housing Finance Agency. My officials and I will continue to work with colleagues in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to advance this.

## **Citizenship Applications**

307. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Justice the reason a person (details supplied) is waiting so long for citizenship; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45811/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** The original passport of the applicant referred to by the Deputy was returned by registered post on 21 September 2021, along with an acknowledgement letter.

Under normal circumstances, passports are returned approximately 10 days after their receipt. However, the limits on staff attendance in the office due to COVID-19 restrictions have resulted in delays in the return of some passports.

In June 2021, a notice was published on the Immigration Service website asking applicants not to submit their passport with an application for naturalisation between 25 June and 30 September 2021, in order to help with prioritising the processing of applications.

Applicants are advised not to send in their application during this period if they anticipate that they may have to travel at short notice. However, I fully appreciate that people may have to travel at short notice for emergency reasons or require their passports for official reasons. The website advises that, in these circumstances, applicants should email the citizenship helpdesk with the relevant details. Any request must be accompanied by appropriate scanned supporting material, for example, in the case of travel detailing the reasons for travel, such as medical information. Any request of this nature is dealt with promptly.

## **Naturalisation Applications**

308. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of an application for naturalisation in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45787/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** An application for a certificate of naturalisation was received from the person referred to by the Deputy on 2 September 2020. This application is currently being processed with a view to establishing whether the applicant meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision as expeditiously as possible.

The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements not only within the State but also at European Union level and it is important that appropriate procedures are in place to preserve the integrity of the process.

It is recognised that all applicants for citizenship would wish to have a decision on their application without delay. However, the nature of the naturalisation process is such that, for a broad range of reasons, some cases will take longer than others to process. In some instances, completing the necessary checks can take a considerable period of time.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility at: [INISOireachtasMail@justice.ie](mailto:INISOireachtasMail@justice.ie), which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Question process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in

the cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

### **Visa Applications**

309. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the reason stamp 4 and not stamp 1 has been awarded in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45788/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** An incorrect stamp was unfortunately issued in error to the person referred to by the Deputy. A new residence permit with the correct permission will be issued immediately.

The person referred to by the Deputy lodged a review application in respect of their EU Treaty Rights application decision on 2 August 2017. This application was examined in detail and a decision was made to uphold the decision to refuse their EU Treaty Rights application on 1 March 2021. Reasons for the refusal are outlined in the refusal letter.

This person's case may need to be examined to see if it falls within the parameters of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruling in the Chenchooliah case. As the Deputy may already be aware, the ECJ's ruling in that case requires a new process to be developed in this State to deal with the cases of third country national persons who may have been deemed to come within the scope of the EU Free Movement Directive but for whom the circumstances which allowed those persons to remain in the State no longer apply. The required process is still under development and will be finalised in the coming months.

As this person's longer-term position in the State remains to be determined and the new post-Chenchooliah process is still being developed, a decision was taken to grant them a short-term permission to remain in the State. As an exceptional measure, they have been granted permission to remain in the State, on Stamp 1 conditions, (without the requirement to obtain an employment permit), for a period of six months.

### **International Protection**

310. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice when details of the IHAP 3 scheme will be announced; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45795/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** I do not propose to reopen the IHAP programme, which is closed to new applications. Approximately 76 Afghan nationals have been issued with immigration status letters by my Department so far this year under IHAP, enabling them to reside and work in the State.

In response to the worsening humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, I have asked my Department officials to examine, as a matter of urgency, proposals for a humanitarian admission programme whereby persons resident in Ireland could apply for family members in Afghanistan to be granted admission to Ireland. The introduction of any new scheme, along similar lines to the previous Syrian Humanitarian Admission Programme (SHAP) and IHAP, would require a Government decision. I intend to bring proposals to Government in relation to this matter in the near future.

As you will be aware, the Government announced that a significant number of Afghan people would be allocated places on the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP), which is under the remit of my colleague, Minister O'Gorman. My Department is providing the visas

to facilitate their travel to Ireland and has issued more than 340 visas or letters in lieu to date. Priority has been given to those working on human rights issues, including the rights of women and girls and minorities, as well as those working with NGOs and European and international organisations.

My Department is currently focused on processing applications for Afghan family members of Irish citizens and Afghan nationals living in Ireland. We are prioritising all such applications and processing them speedily and sympathetically.

In addition to visa applications, my Department is currently processing family reunification applications for 65 Afghan family members. These are being prioritised, with full consideration given to the current humanitarian context. To date this year, family reunification permission has been granted to 106 Afghan family members under the terms of the International Protection Act 2015.

International protection applications from Afghan nationals are already prioritised and, to date this year, 70 Afghan nationals have applied for protection in Ireland. The processing of these applications takes full account of whether a person will be in danger if not provided with a permission to remain here. My Department is currently reviewing all international protection applications on hand from Afghan nationals with a view to expediting their progress, in line with recent updated advices provided by UNHCR.

### **Proposed Legislation**

311. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Justice the expected timeline on the publication and presentation to the Dáil Éireann for the proposed new hate crime legislation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45796/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** The General Scheme of the Criminal Justice (Hate Crime) Bill 2021 was published on 16 April and is available on my Department's website.

Following its publication in April, the General Scheme was referred to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice for pre-legislative scrutiny. The scheduling of pre-legislative scrutiny is a matter for the Committee.

The Bill has also been referred to the Office of Parliamentary Counsel for drafting.

The Bill will create new, aggravated forms of certain existing criminal offences, where those offences are motivated by prejudice against a protected characteristic, which include sexuality and gender.

The General Scheme provides for amendments to the Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person Act to provide for harassment aggravated by prejudice against one of the protected characteristics and also provides for harassment aggravated by prejudice against a protected characteristic with threats to kill or cause serious harm.

The aggravated offences will generally carry an enhanced penalty, compared to the ordinary offence, and the record of any conviction for such an offence would clearly state that the offence was a hate crime.

### **Human Trafficking**

312. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Justice the assessment her Department has made of Ireland being ranked as a tier two watchlist country in the 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report (details supplied); the action she is taking to combat human trafficking; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45816/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Human trafficking is a heinous crime based on deception and exploitation of vulnerable people. Combatting it is, and will continue to be, a priority for this Government and over the past year we have introduced significant measures to combat trafficking, to create a more victim-centred approach to identifying and supporting victims and to raise awareness and provide training.

While it was very disappointing that the US State Department did not acknowledge the significant progress made by Ireland over the past 12 months as sufficient to upgrade our ranking in the latest 'Trafficking in Persons' Report, I am confident that the work we are doing should be reflected in the next TiPs report and that Ireland's ranking should be upgraded accordingly.

I note that a number of key areas identified in the latest TiPs Report reflect the ongoing work that is, in some cases, already well-advanced, including:

- The recent approval by Government to revise the National Referral Mechanism to make it easier for victims of trafficking to come forward, be identified and access advice, accommodation and support;
- The drafting of a new National Action Plan on Human Trafficking;
- The development of training, through NGOs, targeting front line staff in industries such as hospitality, airline and shipping who may come into contact with trafficked persons;
- The work being undertaken to provide dedicated accommodation for female victims of sexual exploitation;
- The improvements being made to the Criminal Justice System to support victims through the implementation of *Supporting A Victim's Journey*;
- The running of a new awareness-raising campaign in partnership with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) to build on the success of previous campaigns;
- An increase in funding for supporting victims of crime generally and increased funding dedicated specifically to supporting victims of trafficking.

The latest report also highlighted that at the time of drafting there were no convictions for human trafficking in Ireland. In this regard it is important to highlight the significance of the recent convictions for human trafficking handed down by the Courts and to acknowledge the dedication of An Garda Síochána in investigating and tackling this hideous crime.

It was concerning that one of the factors given weight in this latest report was the continued reliance on an assessment made in an earlier TiPs report in relation to the fishing industry. This assessment was fully investigated by An Garda Síochána and no evidence was found to support the allegations of widespread human trafficking in the fishing industry. It is unclear why the State Department chose to place weight on one voice and not to take account of the balance of stakeholder assessment – including assessment by NGOs active in Ireland in tackling human trafficking – that these accusations are without foundation.

The allegations in that regard should be assessed also in the light of the High Court judgment in the case *International Transport Workers' Federation v the Minister for Justice and*

*Equality [2018 No. 5398 P]* which referred, in refusing an application for an injunction on behalf of the International Transport Federation, inter alia, to ‘*the extent of reliance by the plaintiff on speculation and the reports of others without applying due process like procedures to those accounts*’.

As the Deputy will be aware, Ireland has strong separation of powers and the courts are independent of Government. A High Court judgment cannot be dismissed as an expression of opinion amongst potentially many others, but – unless overturned on appeal – is a conclusive finding of law or fact.

I am hopeful that the State Department will look at this particular issue more objectively when assessing Ireland’s ranking for the next TiPs Report.

### Home Care Packages

313. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his views on a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied); if this is in line with his Department’s workforce planning; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45755/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Programme for Government commits to the introduction of a statutory scheme to support people to live in their own homes, which will provide equitable access to high-quality, regulated home care. The Department of Health is in the process of developing a statutory scheme for the financing and regulation of home-support. It is intended that the new scheme will provide equitable and transparent access to high-quality services based on a person’s assessed care-needs.

As part of this work, my department is examining the potential demand and cost of introducing such a scheme. Following this, work will be undertaken to examine the associated workforce requirements for the introduction of such a scheme and officials from my department will engage with relevant stakeholders from other sectors as required.

The Department of Health is cognisant of the challenges associated with the recruitment and retention of staff in the home care sector and is committed to working across Government with relevant stakeholders to ameliorate these issues.

The employment permits system operated by the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment is designed to facilitate the entry of appropriately skilled non-EEA nationals to fill skills and/or labour shortages. This objective must be balanced by the need to ensure that there are no suitably qualified Irish/EEA nationals available to undertake the work. The employment permits system 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 critical skills and ineligible occupation lists are reviewed twice yearly in a process led by the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment. It is an evidence-based process that takes account of labour market conditions and submissions from sectors and other stakeholders together with contextual factors, including in the current context, COVID-19. The purpose of the system is to maximise the benefits of economic migration while minimising the risk of disrupting the Irish labour market.

The review of the occupations list for 2021 is currently underway and officials from my department are engaging in discussions with officials from the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment in respect of submissions received relating to the health sector. The public

consultation phase of this review commenced on 1st July 2021 with a closing date for submissions of Thursday, 12th August 2021. The submissions received from the home care sector will be considered by the Department of Health and the Interdepartmental Group for Economic Migration Policy in the context of this review.

### **Healthcare Policy**

314. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** 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. [45757/21]

315. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** 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. [45758/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 314 and 315 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. 315 answered with Question No. 314.*

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

316. **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. [45764/21]

**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.

### **Departmental Reports**

317. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health if he will request the Health Service Executive to include the maintenance and upkeep of an AED register in the report that the HSE has commissioned on Out of Hospital Cardiac Arrest Strategy of Ireland (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45768/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** AEDs (defibrillators) are available in many locations across society under the management of various organisations. The maintenance and upkeep of these devices is a matter for the supplying organisations. The HSE is not responsible for the supply or upkeep of AEDs. As such, an AED register would not be within the scope of the Out of Hospital Cardiac Arrest Strategy.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

318. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Health his plans in moving forward with regard to Covid-19 testing sites as testing and tracing efforts remain a key part of a response to the pandemic; if there are plans to expand testing in any capacity to rural areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45769/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Testing and contact tracing has been a key component of our response to the pandemic and has been fundamental to identifying the source, and containing the spread of the virus.

The Government is acutely aware of the importance of testing and contact tracing, and how the system has responded to periods of increased demand, including the high demand currently being experienced. The availability of an accessible testing service remains an essential tool in the immediate fight against Covid-19.

Current standing capacity is 175,000 tests per week. 140,000 in Community and Serial Testing, and 35,000 in Acute hospitals. Serial Testing Programmes are ongoing in Nursing Homes, Mental Health Facilities, Food Production Facilities and in Mandatory Quarantine Sites.

The success of our vaccination programme provides an opportunity to consider the national approach to testing and tracing and how it might change in the evolving public health response to the virus. A key priority in planning the future of our testing and tracing model is ensuring that the service is appropriate to the needs of our ongoing response, and we will continue to monitor and amend the testing strategy in line with the epidemiological profile of the disease, its impact on healthcare utilisation and outcomes, and the vaccination status of the population.

The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) has made a number of recommendations for the testing and tracing programme for the coming period, subject to an assessment of the impact of the return to education on the epidemiological profile of the disease.

I have approved a recommendation, for implementation in the coming days, focusing on children in early years and primary education settings to ensure that the education of the children of this country can continue uninterrupted to the greatest extent possible. NPHE has advised that any further potential changes will be subject to ongoing assessment of the prevailing epidemiological conditions, and I will give them consideration at the appropriate time.

It is important to state that people with COVID-19 symptoms, including children in school and childcare settings, should continue to rapidly self-isolate and not attend school/college/workplaces or to socialise until 48 hours after resolution of symptoms.

## Hospital Facilities

319. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health when capital funding will be allocated to Belmullet Hospital for a modular build that will ensure the safety of patients and a maximum of 12 step-down beds can be operated in relation to infection prevention control issues identified during a HIQA inspection of the service at Belmullet Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45774/21]

**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.

## Eating Disorders

320. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Health the status of the provision of specialised respite services for those affected by Prader-Willi syndrome; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45776/21]

**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 Staff

321. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide funding to appoint a clinical psychologist to each acute hospital diabetes multidisciplinary team; his views on whether psychosocial support in diabetes care is not formally embedded as part of diabetes management; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45778/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Diabetes is a complex condition that can have a profound impact on the quality of life of people living with the condition, the management of emotional and psychological well-being is an important part of diabetes care and self-management. Self-management education programmes such as DAFNE (for people living with type 1 diabetes) and DESMOND and Discover Diabetes (for people living with type 2 diabetes) help provide psychosocial support for many people living with diabetes.

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

322. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Health if a diabetes psychology resource will be provided to each community diabetes specialist team hub under the integrated model of care for the prevention and management of chronic disease implementation guide; his views on whether access to psychosocial support in these teams should be made available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45779/21]

**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**

323. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide funding to appoint a 0.5 whole-time equivalent clinical psychologist to each acute hospital diabetes paediatric diabetes team; his views on whether psychosocial support in paediatric diabetes care should be available in each team; the reason there is no access to this support outside of Dublin paediatric diabetes services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45780/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The information necessary to answer the Deputy's question is not available at this time. However I have asked the Health Service Executive to provide me with the information and I will respond to the Deputy as soon as it becomes available.

### **Hospital Staff**

324. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide funding for a post of clinical psychologist to the multidisciplinary team in Wexford General Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45781/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **General Practitioner Services**

325. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health the steps that should be taken by a person who cannot secure general practitioner services locally and has made efforts to secure a general practitioner within a reasonable radius of their home. [45783/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Where a GMS patient experiences difficulty in finding a GP to accept him/her as a patient, the person concerned having unsuccessfully applied to at least three GPs in the area can apply to the HSE National Medical Card Unit which has the power to assign that person to a GP's GMS patient list.

People who do not hold a medical card or GP visit card access GP services on a private basis and can make enquiries directly to any GP practice they wish to register with. As private contractors, it is a matter for each individual GP to decide whether to accept additional private patients. Where a GP practice has a full list of patients and cannot take on new patients, patients should contact other GP practices in the surrounding areas.

The Government is aware of the workforce issues currently facing general practice, including the limited access to GP services in certain areas, and has implemented a number of mea-

asures to improve recruitment and retention in general practice.

These measures include an increase in investment in general practice by approximately 40% (€210 million) between 2019 and 2023 under the terms of the 2019 GMS GP Agreement. The Agreement provides for increased support for GPs working in rural practices and for those in disadvantaged urban areas, and for improvements to maternity and paternity leave arrangements. In addition, the number of GPs entering training has been increased steadily over the past number of years, rising from 120 in 2009 to 233 in 2021.

### **Vaccination Programme**

326. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health if arrangements are available for the vaccination of persons who cannot leave their homes for reasons of agoraphobia. [45809/21]

**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**

327. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health the reason health and social care professionals in primary care will be able to progress from staff grade to senior grade while those same professionals with the same length of time with regard to experience in hospitals and the mental health area will not; the rationale for allowing some to progress in their careers while others cannot; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45823/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy.

### **Health Services**

328. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 306 of 25 February 2021, the reason women who turned 61 years of age before 30 March 2020 will not be screened at 65 years given the screening programme has been increased up to 65 years; the number of women who will miss out due to this specific use of a date; the reason women are no longer screened beyond the age of 65; the reason this decision on the March date was decided; the person or body which decided it; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45824/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

### **Nursing Homes**

329. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health if a list of nursing homes in the State in which residents in them are provided with tailored support packages or comfort monies will be provided; the number of individuals who receive these supports; the grounds on which they receive them; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45825/21]

**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.

### **Nursing Homes**

330. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health the average payment made to private nursing homes under the National Treatment Purchase Fund by county. [45826/21]

**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.

### **Nursing Homes**

331. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health the number of nursing homes in the State that receive a top-up payment from the HSE in respect of a resident or residents; the corresponding county each nursing home is located; the rationale for these top-up payments; and the way in which it is determined who receives them. [45827/21]

**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**

332. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health the amount of funding provided to a centre (details supplied); the number of staff currently employed; the current services available; the number of vacant posts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45828/21]

**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 directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Vaccination Programme**

333. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health the way an Irish citizen vaccinated outside of Ireland but in the EU avails of an EU Digital COVID Certificate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45831/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The EU Digital COVID Certificate is a document which is issued to help facilitate enable the safe and free international movement of people across the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The underpinning EU Digital COVID Certificate regulation concerns the issuing and verification of certificates for medical events including vaccination, recovery, and testing related to COVID-19.

A person who underwent a medical event, including a full course of vaccination, in an EU

country outside of Ireland, must request a Digital COVID Certificate from the issuing authorities in that specific EU country.

### **General Practitioner Services**

334. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the steps his Department is taking in the short-term, notwithstanding the Government's commitments to reforms in this area under the Sláintecare plan, to ensure that general practitioners cannot charge excessive fees to patients who do not hold a medical card or general practitioner visit card; the steps his Department is taking in the context of the implementation of Sláintecare to move to a system of universal general practitioner care without charges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45835/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** GPs are private practitioners, most of whom hold a GMS (General Medical Services) contract with the HSE to provide services without charge to patients who hold a medical card or a GP visit card. GPs are reimbursed by the HSE for the provision of those services. Medical and GP visit card holders are not subject to a charge for GP face to face or phone consultations.

People who do not hold a medical card or GP visit card access GP services on a private basis. Neither my Department or the HSE have any role in relation to the fees charged by individual GPs for private consultations, as these are a matter of private contract between the clinicians and their patients.

Following the introduction of GP care without charges for all children under 6 years of age in 2015, a phased expansion extending GP care without charges to all children under 13 years of age is now planned that moves towards the Sláintecare objective of access to universal GP care without charges.

As of August, almost approximately 2,090,000 persons hold either a medical card or a GP Visit Card, thus approximately 41.7% of the population currently have access to GP care without fees.

It is estimated that extending GP care without charges to all children under 13 will benefit approximately an additional 285,000 children who would not otherwise be eligible. The first phase of the expansion, extending care without charges to 6- and 7-year olds, is estimated to benefit approximately an additional 77,000 children.

The legislative basis for the expansion is in place. The appropriate date for commencing the expansion remains under consideration in light of COVID-19 and the additional pressures the expansion might place on general practice in that context. This date will be determined following consultation with the IMO. It is important to ensure that any additional pressures placed on general practice will not limit its capacity to meet the needs of all patients in the community.

### **Vaccination Programme**

335. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if male secondary school students who were in second year or over when the roll-out of HPV vaccines for their gender began in 2019, can access the vaccine through the public health system; if he plans to hold mopup clinics for this cohort of teenage boys; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45836/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The immunisation programme in Ire-

land is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The committee's recommendations are based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international best practice in relation to immunisation. It makes recommendations on vaccination policy to my Department. The NIAC continues to revise recommendations to allow for the introduction of new vaccines in Ireland and to keep abreast of changes in the patterns of disease. Therefore, the immunisation schedule will continue to be amended over time.

In 2009, the NIAC recommended HPV (human papillomavirus) vaccination for all 12 to 13 year old girls to reduce their risk of developing cervical cancer when they are adults. In September 2010, the HPV vaccination programme was introduced for all girls in first year of secondary school.

In June 2017, on foot of the NIAC's recommendation that the HPV vaccine should also be given to boys, my Department asked the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) to undertake a health technology assessment (HTA) to establish the clinical and cost-effectiveness of extending the immunisation programme to include boys in the first year of secondary school.

The HIQA completed the HTA in December 2018, recommending that the HPV immunisation programme be extended to include boys. A policy decision was made to extend the HPV immunisation programme to include boys, starting in September 2019, with the introduction of a 9-valent HPV vaccine.

The ages at which vaccines are recommended in the immunisation schedule are chosen by the NIAC in order to give each child the best possible protection against vaccine preventable diseases. As the HPV vaccine is preventative it is intended to be administered, if possible, before a person becomes sexually active, that is, before a person is first exposed to HPV infection.

Therefore, the gender-neutral HPV vaccination programme targets all girls and boys in first year of secondary school to provide maximum coverage. All vaccines administered through the School Immunisation Programme are provided free of charge.

My Department will continue to be guided by NIAC's recommendations on any emerging evidence on this issue in the future.

Anyone not in 1st year of secondary school or age equivalent in special schools or home schooled during the 2020/2021 school year who wishes to get the HPV vaccine, must go to their GP or sexual health clinic and pay privately for the vaccine and its administration. This applies to everyone whether or not they have a medical card/GP visit card, as it is outside of the HPV immunisation programme.

The Health Information & Quality Authority are conducting a Health Technology Assessment (HTA) on a school based HPV mop-up vaccination programme. The HIQA has confirmed that this HTA has been added to its work programme for 2021/2022.

## **Medical Cards**

336. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health the number of medications which have been removed from being available for free under a medical card in the past three years; the person or body which decides to remove such medications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45838/21]

**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 Cards

337. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health if a medication (details supplied) will be made available again under the medical card; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45839/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Health Service Executive (HSE) has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicinal products under the community drug schemes, in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013.

Following a review, the HSE introduced a new system for the reimbursement of the lidocaine 5% medicated plaster (Versatis), which is licensed only for the localised relief of post-shingles pain in adults.

Patients are reviewed by the Medicines Management Programme (MMP) for reimbursement approval, on foot of an application by the patient's clinician, through the HSE online system.

In exceptional circumstances, the product may be approved for supply for unlicensed uses.

If an application is refused, the clinician may make an appeal, making a clear clinical case for the patient to the MMP at [mmp@hse.ie](mailto:mmp@hse.ie).

This process ensures the appropriate use of the patch and that post-shingles patients, and other patients as clinically appropriate, can continue to have this treatment.

## Medical Cards

338. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health if a medication (details supplied) will be made available again under the medical card; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45840/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## Home Care Packages

339. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding a home care package for a person (details supplied) in County Meath; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45849/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## Hospital Waiting Lists

340. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who are currently awaiting inpatient eye care procedures in the community healthcare organisation Dublin north city and county area; the average waiting time for an inpatient appointment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45850/21]

**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**

341. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who are currently awaiting outpatient eye care treatment in the community healthcare organisation Dublin north city and county area; the average waiting time for an outpatient appointment; the average waiting time for a procedure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45851/21]

**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**

342. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons in the community healthcare organisation Dublin north city and county area who have been waiting six, 12, 18 and more than 18 months to access outpatient eye care. [45852/21]

**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.

### **Disabilities Assessments**

343. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health the reason a person (details supplied) has been waiting so long for an assessment of need appointment. [45857/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

344. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health if he will facilitate the appointment of the new chairperson of the North Inner City Drug and Alcohol Taskforce as agreed by consensus at the taskforce minuted meeting of 16 March 2021, in full adherence to the Local and Regional Drugs Task Forces Handbook. [45860/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** Drug and Alcohol Task Forces play a key role in the implementation of the national drugs strategy, *Reducing Harm Supporting Recovery 2017-2015*. To improve accountability across the statutory, community and voluntary sectors and to strengthen the task force model, task forces are required have proper arrangements in place for the selection and renewal of the chairperson and members of the task forces and have proper procedures in place for addressing conflicts of interest.

The North Inner City Drug and Alcohol Task Force has an annual allocation of €2.2 million in funds from the Department of Health. The Department has worked very cooperatively with

the task force in recent years to enhance its contribution to the North East Inner City Initiative.

I support the autonomy of the task force to appoint its chairperson and believe the collective membership is the appropriate entity to appoint a chairperson, on a consensual basis. I have made known my concerns about the procedures for the selection and appointment of a new chairperson to the membership. The membership should have the opportunity to consider these concerns and to decide how it wishes to proceed on the appointment of a chairperson.

I have written to the outgoing chair asking him to engage with all members of the task force - community, voluntary and statutory – to consider this matter and have requested an update on his engagement with members as soon as is possible.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

345. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health when a tonsillectomy can be arranged for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45908/21]

**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.

### **Assisted Decision-Making**

346. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 163 of 7 July 2021, if he will provide a list of all other interdependencies (details supplied) which must be addressed before Part 8 of the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 can be commenced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45910/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy is aware, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has overall policy responsibility for the Assisted Decision-Making Capacity Act with the exception of Part 8, which is the responsibility of my Department. Work is underway in that Department on the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Bill with a view to full commencement of the Act.

Some of the provisions in other Parts of the Act of 2015 interconnect with Part 8, and work is continuing in respect of all other outstanding matters which need to be addressed before Part 8 can be commenced.

The work under Part 8 of the Act, which provides a legislative framework for Advanced Healthcare Directives (AHDs), has been progressing through the AHD multidisciplinary working group established by the Minister in 2016. The codes of practice for Part 8 were developed and submitted it to the Director of Decision Support Services in December 2018 for consideration. There is a requirement under the Act of 2015 for the Director to put the codes out to consultation before being finalised and my Department will be informed of the timeline for these consultations shortly.

As soon as we are notified of this we will respond to the Deputy directly in this regard.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

347. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if his Department has engaged with universities and colleges on the use of Covid-19 antigen testing in third-level institutions; the plans that are in place for the roll-out of antigen testing on college campuses; the timeline for any such roll-out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45912/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Considerable work has been undertaken to date to evaluate the potential use of rapid antigen detection tests (RADTs) in an Irish context and this will continue on an ongoing basis.

Rapid antigen testing pilot schemes began on June 14th in four universities including NUI Galway, Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin, and University College Cork. Three additional third level education institutes have signed up for the programme and are currently preparing to begin testing. The HSE has established an online portal to facilitate reporting of antigen test results, with those in receipt of a 'detected' result subsequently referred for a confirmatory PCR test.

Given the evidence currently available, the programme of antigen detection testing in third level institutions is currently operating as a pilot programme and subject to fuller evaluation, with particular regard to its effectiveness, feasibility and avoidance of any unintended consequences.

Given uncertainty surrounding the clinical- and cost-effectiveness of RADT-based screening programmes in asymptomatic individuals to limit the transmission of SARS-CoV-2, such as would be the case in these institutions, it would be appropriate to await the results of the pilot to provide more real-world evidence required to inform policy on the widespread use of RADTs in asymptomatic individuals.

### **Vaccination Programme**

348. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if plans are in place to give a third Covid-19 vaccine dose to those who would be identified as being at high-risk from Covid-19 or who are immunocompromised; if so, the timeline for any such roll-out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45927/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** On 1 September, I announced an update to the Covid-19 vaccination programme following updated recommendations from the NIAC. The recommendations involved extending the primary vaccination course with an mRNA dose for immunocompromised individuals aged 12 years and older irrespective of whether the initial doses were an mRNA or adenoviral vector vaccine.

The third dose of an mRNA vaccine should be given a minimum of two months after the second dose of the extended vaccination schedule.

It is currently anticipated that the administration of the third dose extension programme for immunocompromised will commence the week of 27 September and will take approximately 5-6 weeks to complete.

It is important to note that the NIAC has made a distinction between an additional vaccine

for those who have mounted a sub-optimal immune response to the primary vaccination course and booster vaccine doses which may be required by some, or all, of the population as a result of waning immunity and vaccine effectiveness over time.

On 8 September, I announced a further update to the Covid-19 vaccination programme following additional advice from the NIAC. The Committee has recommended a booster dose of an mRNA vaccine (irrespective of whether the primary vaccination course was of an mRNA or adenoviral vector) for residents aged 65 years and older living in Long Term Residential Care Facilities and for those aged 80 years and older living in the community.

I have accepted this advice and the HSE has been requested to make the necessary arrangements to operationalise the recommendations. The NIAC continues to examine emerging evidence regarding booster vaccines for those with waning immunity and reduced effectiveness in other groups.

### **Hospital Waiting Lists**

349. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the waiting times for cataract surgery in each hospital in which such surgery takes place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45933/21]

**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.

In recent years, my Department has worked with the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) to improve access for patients waiting for high volume procedures, including cataracts. Ophthalmology services are provided throughout all hospital groups in the country, with cataract removal one of the key procedures carried out as part of this specialty.

A key development in improving access to Ophthalmology services was the opening of a stand-alone high-volume consultant-led cataract theatre by the University of Limerick Hospital Group in Nenagh Hospital in 2018, with the intention that it would facilitate patients from surrounding geographical areas to avail of their treatment there. The impact of such initiatives can be seen in the reduction in the waiting times to access cataract procedures since 2019. At the end of August 2021 there were 4,511 patients waiting for a cataract procedure compared to 5,528 in August 2019.

An additional €240 million has been provided in Budget 2021 for an access to care fund, €210m of which has been allocated to the HSE and a further €30m to the NTPF. This is to be used to fund additional capacity to address the shortfall arising as a result of infection control

measures taken in the context of COVID-19, as well as addressing backlogs in waiting lists.

My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are currently working on a Multiannual Waiting List Plan to address waiting lists and bring them in line with Sláintecare targets over the coming years.

The information requested by the Deputy concerning the waiting times for cataract surgery in each hospital, is outlined in the table below.

Total Active IPDC Waiters for Cataract Surgery by Hospital by Wait Time Band as at 26/08/2021

Sum of Total	Column Labels					
Row Labels	0-6 Months	6-12 Months	12-18 Months	18+ Months	Small Volume Time Bands	Grand Total
CHI		5				5
Galway University Hospitals	326	24		6		356
Letterkenny University Hospital	17	7		8		32
Mater Misericordiae University Hospital	1315	193	42	65		1615
Nenagh Hospital	114	75	13	12		214
Royal Victoria Eye and Ear Hospital	820	107	27	52		1006
Sligo University Hospital	259	26	39	78		402
Small Volume Hospitals			7	5	2	14
South Infirmary Victoria University Hospital	162	24	5	5		196
St. Vincent's University Hospital	156	6				162

University Hospital Limerick	72	40	6	47		165
University Hospital Waterford	180	29	14	121		344
Grand Total	3421	536	153	399	2	4511

### Health Services

350. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health his plans to roll-out the Sligo model of eye care; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45934/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Agriculture Schemes

351. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a decision will be reached on an appeal by a person (details supplied) in County Mayo. [45765/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The above named made an application to Young Farmers Capital Investment (YFCIS) of TAMS II on 7th January 2020. A payment claim was subsequently submitted on 1st March 2021.

During the processing of the claim documents, the applicant was chosen for inspection which was carried out on 4th May 2021. On inspection, it was found that there was a difference between the number of multi place feeders and meal troughs found and claimed for.

A pre-payment penalty letter dated 17th June 2021 issued to the applicant informing them that a 100% penalty would apply to the In-parlour feeding system investment.

The applicant's have sought a review of this penalty which is currently being processed. Once the review is complete, the applicants will be notified of the outcome.

### Grant Payments

352. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of a grant application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45770/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The person named made an application to the Young Farmers Capital Investment Scheme (YFCIS) of TAMS II on 9th January 2020.

A claim for payment was submitted on 25th June 2021. Queries raised with the applicants agent on the application are outstanding since 17th August 2021. As soon as the Agent responds, the Department will be in a better position to process the claim.

## **Brexit Supports**

353. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if subsequent to the implementation of rules prohibiting the landing of live bivalve molluscs including wild caught scallops in UK ports he will address the serious financial cost to scallop fishers fishing off the coast of the UK now required to land their catch in EU ports; the reason these fishers are not included in other support schemes; if his attention has been drawn to the impact of this requirement on all involved in fishing, processing and transporting these products; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45773/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** It is important to note that food safety standards and the protection of consumers continues to be of paramount importance.

The rules for landings of Live Bivalve Molluscs (LBMs) into the United Kingdom are set down by the United Kingdom authorities. The Sanitary and Phytosanitary allowance to directly-land fishery products which is not yet required but will, I understand, be required from 1 July 2022, does not include LBMs such as wild-caught scallops.

The United Kingdom Government announced on 14 September 2021 that it would further postpone the introduction of upcoming new UK import controls (including Sanitary and Phytosanitary requirements) which had been scheduled for 1 October 2021 to 1 July 2022. I understand that import requirements for direct landings of LBMs are also being delayed until 1 July 2022. The United Kingdom position from 1 July 2022 will replicate the EU position regarding LBM landings by a Third Country vessel into the EU.

LBMs or mollusc-derived products can be imported to the EU if dispatched as food fit for human consumption from an approved establishment and having undergone any treatment or processing necessary to ensure they meet EU food safety standards, including purification or shucking where necessary.

Some Irish vessels had previously landed to United Kingdom ports for freight transport of the live scallop directly from the landing to Irish processors, where they were shucked and sold generally to the EU continental market. Since January 2021 these operators can continue to land to United Kingdom ports, subject to NEAFC requirements, until 1 July 2022. However, since January 2021 freight consignments of LBMs from the United Kingdom to Ireland require dispatch from a UK-approved establishment and compliance, for the protection of EU consumers, with EU food safety importation requirements.

In relation to financial supports, I established a Seafood Sector Task Force in March 2021 so that stakeholders could be centrally involved in assessing such impacts. I received an Interim Report on 9 June 2021 and the Task Force is currently giving full consideration to possible actions before making final recommendations.

I expect to receive the Final Report in the next month or so and further measures will be examined to assist our seafood sector and coastal communities to adjust to the post Brexit world and to continue to prosper. You will appreciate that I cannot pre-judge the recommendations of the Task Force and how they might relate to any particular fishery.

## **Farm Household Incomes**

354. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his

views on introducing a universal basic income for farmers on a trial basis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45928/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The aim of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is to support all farmers across the community to help them produce safe, nutritious and quality foods. As we progress towards CAP 2023-2026, payments will reflect a more level distribution of payments that is intended to secure the viability and sustainability of the small to medium holdings that play an integral part in Ireland's agriculture sector and rural viability.

The average Family Farm Income as outlined in the Teagasc National Farm Survey in 2020 was €25,663, an increase of 9% on 2019, despite the difficult year due to the pandemic. Furthermore, the average direct payment per hectare was €417 with an average direct payment per farm of €17,850. This direct payment represented 70% of the average Family Farm Income in 2020 across all farms but up to 151% of average income on cattle rearing farms.

I am continuing my extensive engagement with stakeholders on the future of CAP. In CAP 2023, the Basic Income Support for Sustainability (BISS) Scheme will replace the current Basic Payment Scheme (BPS). BISS will provide income support for farmers in Ireland. Under the proposed BISS, there is a mandatory requirement for Member States to ensure that, by 2026, all payment values reach a minimum convergence level of 85% for all payment entitlements, creating a more levelled distribution of payments.

Further interventions in the new CAP such as Complementary Redistributive Income Support for Sustainability (CRISS) will compound payments to support and ensure a mandatory redistribution of direct payment funding to small and medium sized farms.

The inclusion of Eco-Schemes reflects a clear policy shift towards a greater environment and climate ambition for the CAP. The higher the amount of funding allocated to such schemes, the greater the impact on payment entitlement values and farmers' payments. Participation in Eco-Schemes will offer farmers the opportunity to maximise their Direct Payment amounts while also contributing to the greater environmental ambition proposed for the new CAP.

Universal basic income for farmers would be a significant shift from the CAP measures which have recently been agreed as currently outlined above and would require extensive research, modelling of payment frameworks and consultation. I will continue to engage with stakeholders as we develop our CAP Strategic Plan.

## **Agriculture Schemes**

355. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on a continuation of a welfare scheme for sheep, including the provision to pay up to €20 per ewe; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45929/21]

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

The strong performance of the sector in 2020 has continued into 2021 and I am delighted that farmers are being rewarded from the market for their hard work. Reductions in production globally and increased demand are expected to support continued strong performance throughout 2021. The current average price is €6.07 per kg, which is 20% above the same period last year.

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

I was pleased to be able to secure funding as part of Budget 2021 to facilitate the extension of the scheme into 2021 prior to the next CAP. Any further extension to the scheme for 2022 will be considered as part of the budgetary process in October.

The existing payment rate of €10 per eligible breeding ewe set under the current scheme was based on an assessment of the costs incurred and income foregone for the menu of actions set out under the scheme. These were agreed with the Commission when designing the scheme and as such, it is not proposed to amend the payment rates under the scheme at this point.

With regard to the new CAP, officials in the Department have been examining options to build on the existing Sheep Welfare Scheme. It is important to note that any such scheme must operate on the basis of specific actions to enhance animal health and welfare being carried out, with funding on the basis of costs incurred and income foregone, as is the case with the current scheme. The Department is working closely with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to provide indicative funding for co-financing of the rural development aspects of the CAP Strategic Plan (CSP).

A public consultation on the draft interventions proposed for the CSP has recently ended and the submissions received are being reviewed. I will continue to consult on the content of the plan with the key stakeholders, through the CAP Consultative Committee and through additional public consultation later in the year.

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

### **Rural Recreation Policy**

356. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she has received the external review of the walks scheme administered by her Department; if this review has addressed the issue of the role of the rural recreational officer and the equity in resourcing these posts in certain areas due to the number of stakeholders participating and the vast geographical area covered; if in the context of this review, she will reconsider the administrative resources available to the groups participating particularly for the funding of rural recreational officers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [45837/21]

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

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

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The reviewer's final Report was received by my Department in July. I expect to soon be in a position to publish the Report and outline the next steps in implementing the findings outlined in the Report, including steps to address the type of issues identified by the Deputy. I am committed to working with all of the stakeholders to ensure that the scheme can continue to function effectively.