

Written Answers.

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

Questions Nos. 1 to 21, inclusive, answered orally.

Questions Nos. 22 to 32, inclusive, resubmitted.

Official Travel

33. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent trip to New York. [46661/21]

Awaiting reply from Department.

Questions Nos. 34 to 38, inclusive, resubmitted.

National Asset Management Agency

39. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach the reason the timeframe for the NAMA Commission of Investigation has been extended. [46662/21]

Awaiting reply from Department.

Questions Nos. 40 to 58, inclusive, resubmitted.

Cabinet Committees

59. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Brexit will next meet. [48292/21]

The Taoiseach: The Cabinet Committee on Brexit and Northern Ireland operates in accordance with established guidelines for Cabinet Committees and where appropriate, substantive issues are referred to Government for discussion and approval.

In general terms, the Cabinet Committee oversees implementation of relevant Programme for Government commitments in the area of Brexit and Northern Ireland, and ongoing relevant developments.

The Committee was formally established by Government on 6 July 2020, and had its first meeting on 29 October 2020.

The Cabinet Committee last met on 4 March 2021. The next meeting remains to be scheduled. However, relevant issues arising on Brexit and Northern Ireland are also regularly considered at meetings of the full Cabinet. The Cabinet Committee on Europe which last met on 14 October also discusses related matters.

In addition to the meetings of the full Cabinet and of Cabinet Committees, I also meet with Ministers on an individual basis to focus on particular issues where required.

Departmental Contracts

60. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Taoiseach if he or any official from his Department has held meetings or conducted correspondence with a company (details supplied) from 1 January 2017 to date; if his Department has engaged the services of the company for any purposes from 1 January 2017 to date; if so, the nature of such services and the costs incurred; and if a tender process was conducted. [51362/21]

The Taoiseach: My Department has not engaged the services of the company concerned and there are no records of any meetings or correspondence with the company in question.

Departmental Contracts

61. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Taoiseach the amount spent by his Department to date in 2021 for Covid-19 public communications activities; the recipients of the funds allocated; the services provided; and the tendering processes undertaken to ensure optimal value for money in tabular form. [51382/21]

The Taoiseach: Attached is a tabular breakdown of the spend in 2021 on public advertisements in response to the Covid19 pandemic.

All of the contracts for media buying, print ads, radio ads, tv ads, social media promotion, online banner advertising and creative services were contracted through competitive processes and the Office of Government Procurement Framework contracts to ensure best value for money.

Since March of 2020, my Department has co-ordinated communications for the whole-of-government response to the pandemic. This necessitated expenditure on a broad range of targeted public messaging across over fifty different information campaigns.

The overall communications strategy for Covid-19 is based on a coordinated response that ensures maximum clarity for citizens, businesses and our wider community. This aligns with both World Health Organisation (WHO) and European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) advice, both of which emphasise the importance of ensuring the general public is aware of the seriousness of the COVID-19 outbreak, and further that a high degree of population understanding, community engagement and acceptance of the measures put in place are key in preventing further spread.

It is also recommended that communication strategies should target different audiences and provide the rationale behind the measures, also outlining the necessity to put a support system in place to provide essential services and supplies (e.g. food and medication), and to monitor vulnerable individuals.

Campaigns have included Radio, newspaper and social elements.

It is essential that citizens, business owners and communities are informed of the decisions being made by Government, and campaigns are developed and implemented to make the public aware of these decisions.

Campaigns have achieved impressive audience reach across all media platforms. The #AntiViral Campaign had over 5.7 million impressions by mid-December 2020 – we had communicated with over 300,000 young people approximately 5 times across the platforms building awareness of the Campaign. The AntiViral hashtag had over 1.1 million views and the Campaign’s positive sentiment was measured at over 60%.

Data from 25 of the Campaigns advertised in National press show an average reach of 49%, with 17 of these reaching over 50%. The average readership for the 25 campaigns was 1.9 million (with 16 of the 25 campaigns having a readership of over 2 million). Readership figures for regional newspapers is over 1.5 million for each campaign.

Radio advertising had an average audience reach of 79%, with 19 of the campaigns advertised on radio reaching over 80%.

Digital display advertising was used in 13 campaigns, with a combined audience reach of over 33 million. This is an average of 2.6 million impressions, with six of the campaigns reaching over 3 million citizens.

Of 19 campaigns analysed that used Social media advertising, an average of 4.9 million impressions were achieved, with a high of 16.1 million impressions for the Publication of the Roadmap campaign.

[Table]

Census of Population

62. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Taoiseach the measures being taken to support the CSO in efforts to digitalise the Census process. [51590/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): On the advice of the Central Statistics Office (CSO), the Government decided on 15 September 2020 to postpone the 2021 Census to 3 April 2022.

The re-planning for Census 2022 involved revising project timelines and the introduction of new technologies to reduce further potential disruptions, including online interviewing and training.

The 2022 census will continue to be a traditional census where census questionnaires are hand delivered and hand collected by approx. 5,000 enumerators who visit each dwelling in the country. However, technology advances have been deployed in the field operation with the development of a mobile application, the Case Management System (CMS) on enumerator phones, to replace the Enumerator Record Book.

Work has also begun on planning for the next Census after Census 2022 to investigate the feasibility and steps required to conduct an online census, including what it might entail for the Central Statistics Office in regard to staffing and budgetary expenditure as well as the implications for members of the public.

Funding has been approved under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) for

the technology development of an online census platform.

The CSO have been engaging with their international colleagues and taking on board their learnings, as well as engaging with the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO) in regard to this process.

Departmental Contracts

63. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he or any official from his Department has held meetings or conducted correspondence with a company (details supplied) from 1 January 2017 to date; if his Department has engaged the services of the company for any purposes from 1 January 2017 to date; if so, the nature of such services and the costs incurred; if a tender process was conducted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51352/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Neither I nor any officials from my Department have held meetings or conducted correspondence with the company in question in the period since the 1st January 2017.

A search of records has indicated that the CEO of the company in question addressed an ‘Ambition North America’ Conference/Trade Mission in October 2019 which was attended by Minister Pat Breen, who was a Minister of State in the Department at that time.

Climate Change Policy

64. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the efforts being made by his Department to sustain and grow the green economy in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51592/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My department is leading the transition to a low carbon green economy across the Irish enterprise base. We are integrating climate action into all aspects of the Department and its agencies’ activities.

New jobs will emerge in the green economy in sectors such as renewable energies, environmental consultancy services, residential and commercial retrofitting and low carbon technology installation and electric vehicle infrastructure. In order to maximise these opportunities, continuous pre-emptive workforce development is required.

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) has undertaken an analysis of the “Skills to Enable the Low Carbon Economy to 2030”. This forthcoming report provides vital input on the demand for, and nature of, the skills required to facilitate the transition to a low carbon economy. We are now working to disseminate its findings and advance these recommendations with stakeholders, to ensure the delivery of identified skills needs.

My department is also facilitating a drive toward the green economy through its agencies. Earlier this year, Enterprise Ireland launched a pilot Climate Enterprise Action Fund to assist Irish companies to build the capabilities required to deliver sustainable products, services and business models. Under the National Recovery and Resilience Fund, this programme will be expanded until 2025.

IDA Ireland has developed and published a new strategy Driving Recovery and Sustainable Growth 2021-2024 which includes a sustainability pillar and offers clients incentives for sus-

tainability projects, including R&D grants for large scale multi-year projects where companies look to develop next-generation technologies within the sphere of the Green Economy. This places a focus on sustainability in IDA Ireland's corporate strategy including winning FDI from the world's leading companies across all areas of the Green Economy. EI will also set out actions to embed sustainability and climate action as a fundamental part of its approach to company development and engagement with client companies in the context of their forthcoming Strategy.

The National Standards Authority of Ireland is involved in the drive towards a green economy which includes, for example, establishing and enhancing standards for retrofitting, publishing recommendations for the design, installation, commissioning and maintenance of solar PV panels and details on heat pump requirements.

This work will present opportunities for developing and growing the green economy while also assisting in our transition to a low carbon sustainable economy.

Insurance Industry

65. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment further to Parliamentary Question No. 109 of 12 October 2021, if he will provide a schedule of the steps he has taken to reduce insurance costs. [51702/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Robert Troy): As set out in the Programme for Government, this Government is committed to reform of the insurance sector. Recognising that delivering change in this area requires action across Government Departments, Government established the Sub-group on Insurance Reform under the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment. The Sub-group, chaired by the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, published the Action Plan for Insurance Reform in December 2020. This is one of the most important programmes of reform that this Government will undertake. Implementation of the Plan is on track with the first six-monthly Implementation Report published in July 2021, showing that work is progressing well to implement the Action Plan, with 34 of the 66 actions completed. This work is driven by the Cabinet Committee Sub-Group on Insurance Reform, the next meeting of which will be convening this week to review progress to date and consider progress of the remaining actions in a timely manner.

Among the actions completed are the introduction of the Personal Injuries Guidelines which came into effect on the 24th of April. Since the implementation of the Guidelines, the average PIAB award has decreased by approximately 40% with 71% of awards now €15,000 or less compared to 30% of PIAB awards in 2020. Although Government will continue to monitor the situation closely, the new Guidelines clearly represent a significant shift in the manner in which general damages are awarded in our country and in the level of those damages and should exert downward pressure on insurance costs.

With regard to actions under my Department, as Minister of State with responsibility for PIAB I have met regularly with PIAB and a range of representative bodies to assess the role of PIAB and develop proposals to enhance and reform the agency. Heads of a Bill have been developed in consultation with PIAB, which I am considering. I am also progressing legislation to strengthen competition law in Ireland. The legislation will break new ground in this area, giving competition authorities, such as the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC), enhanced powers including administrative sanctions and other tools in dealing with anti-competitive practices.

The Criminal Justice (Perjury and Related Offences) Act 2021 was signed into law in June 2021 and commenced on 28 July 2021. The legislation provides a clear definition of perjury and should enable the offence and related offences to be more easily prosecuted in the courts.

An Office to Promote Competition in the Insurance Market has been established within the Department of Finance, chaired by Minister of State Fleming and supported by my Department. The work of the Office includes engaging with sectoral stakeholders to understand gaps in the insurance market, with a view to expanding the risk appetite of existing insurers. It is also involved in exploring opportunities for new entrants in order to increase the availability of insurance. This Office provides a coordinated Government policy approach to increasing competition in the insurance sector.

The scope of the National Claims Information Database has been widened to cover Employer Liability and Public Liability with a first report published by the Central Bank in July.

While progress on these actions is welcome, Government is committed to doing more to reduce insurance costs. The Minister for Justice is considering legislative proposals to reform the law in the area of occupier's liability. Under the Action Plan, the Department of Justice is working on several actions in the area of fraud. We will also enhance the National Claims Information Database. Ministers and I have met regularly with stakeholders to understand the issues they face and to inform our policy making process. This engagement will continue as we deliver meaningful reform of the insurance sector.

Solar Energy Guidelines

66. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the funding available for the solar electricity grant in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51335/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland administers a grant scheme to help homeowners to install rooftop solar PV panels on their homes. The funding allocated to the scheme for 2021 was €8 million. As of end Q3 2021, 2,328 homes had received support under the scheme, of which 989 achieved a BER B2 rating or above, with €5.3 million in supports provided. This has achieved 9.1MW of installed capacity and a carbon saving of 2,390 tonnes CO₂. €10 million is allocated for the scheme in 2022, an increase on the €8 million allocation for 2021. Grant supports for domestic solar PV in 2022 will align with the upcoming Clean Export Guarantee tariff and other supports to be offered under the planned Micro-generation Support Scheme (MSS). My Department is developing a final scheme design for the MSS, and it is expected that a proposal on the supports to be offered will be submitted to Government later this year.

Departmental Contracts

67. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he or any official from his Department has held meetings or conducted correspondence with a company (details supplied) from 1 January 2017 to date; if his Department has engaged the services of the company for any purposes from 1 January 2017 to date; if so, the nature of such services and the costs incurred; if a tender process was conducted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51353/21]

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

My Department has no records of meetings or correspondence from 1 January 2017 to date between officials in my Department and the company referred to in the Question, nor has my Department engaged the services of the company during that time.

Solar Energy Guidelines

68. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the funding supports available to schools to purchase solar panels ahead of the new microgeneration scheme due to be published shortly; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51424/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Solar PV supports for schools are available as one of the range of measures under the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) Communities Energy Grant Scheme, which makes grant funding available for community-based partnerships to improve the energy efficiency of the building stock in their area. The scheme supports community-oriented projects based on cross-sectoral partnership approaches that deliver energy savings to a range of building types. Public schools are eligible under the scheme for up to 50% funding of the project costs, while private or fee-paying schools are eligible for up to 30% funding. A new call for Communities Energy Grant Scheme projects for 2022 is expected to issue from the SEAI in Q4 2021. Separately, an upcoming Clean Export Guarantee (CEG) tariff represents the first phase of a comprehensive enabling framework for micro-and small-scale generators in Ireland, including schools, allowing them to receive remuneration from their electricity supplier for all excess renewable electricity exported to the grid which reflects the market value of that electricity. The Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) published a consultation on a draft enabling framework on 1 October which outlines the details for the introduction of the CEG payment including eligibility criteria and timescales for introduction, with a decision expected to be published in November and a compensation regime expected to follow shortly afterwards. Further to a public consultation held earlier this year on a Micro-generation Support Scheme (MSS), my Department is developing a final MSS scheme design that incorporates the feedback from the consultation and subsequent additional analysis. It is envisaged that a proposal on the supports to be offered to schools, citizens, farms, and businesses for new installations under the MSS will be submitted to Government later this year.

Climate Change Policy

69. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the annual remuneration and expenses allowance per member of the Climate Change Advisory Council in tabular form. [51439/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Climate Change Advisory Council (CCAC) consists of a chairperson and 13 ordinary members. Ordinary members of the Advisory Council receive an annual fee of €9,800, with the Chair receiving an annual fee of €16,250, in line with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform scale of approved fees for chairpersons and members of State Boards. Ex officio members of the CCAC do not receive remuneration in line with the 'One Person One Salary' remuneration policy for public servants. However, in certain cases, fees are paid directly to the member's parent institution to offset the costs of that member's commitments to the Council. Members of the CCAC also receive travel and subsistence expenses in line with public service rates. These fees and expenses are paid by the EPA out of funding provided by the

Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications. I am advised by the EPA that the remuneration received in 2017 to date by members of the Advisory Council is as follows:

Sum of CCAC Remuneration 2017 to date

-	2017	2018	2018	2020	2021 to date	Total
CCAC Members Fees	€87,010	€75,050	€75,050	€75,050	€16,250	€328,410
Travel and Subsidence	€2,742	€1,777	€2,265	€1,145	€0	€7,929
Total Cost	€89,752	€76,827	€77,315	€76,195	€16,250	€336,339

Departmental Functions

70. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if there are plans to establish the necessary statistical capacity to track material flow in Ireland; and if he will under the forthcoming circular economy legislation commit to setting national material flow targets. [51440/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department has discussed the preparation of a material flow analysis for the Irish economy with the Environmental Protection Agency in the context of the forthcoming establishment of the Agency's Circular Economy Programme. I believe this would represent an important statistical and analytic tool for future policy development regarding the circular economy, and my Department will continue to discuss the necessary scoping work for preparing such an analysis with the Agency. I do not propose to bring forward specific legislative targets in relation to material flows at this time, as it would be precipitous to do so in advance of carrying out the material flow analysis. However, I note that the pre-legislative scrutiny process for the Circular Economy Bill 2021 is currently underway, and I look forward to receiving the report of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Environment and Climate Action on the Bill.

Economic and Social Research Institute

71. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his views on the Economic and Social Research Institute report entitled Carbon taxes, poverty and compensation options, 2020 cited by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform as proof that carbon tax increases leave the lowest income fifth of households on average better off and reduces poverty, fails to take into account the huge increase in energy prices since its publication; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51563/21]

72. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if his attention has been drawn to the ESRI report entitled Carbon Taxes, Poverty and Compensation Options, 2020 cited by his Department as proof that carbon tax increases leaves the lowest income fifth of households on average better off and reduces poverty, does not accurately measure energy poverty, due to the fact that the Government failed to act on a recommendation from their own 2016 Strategy to Combat Energy Poverty, calling for an appropriate

methodology for measuring and tracking energy poverty levels across the State to be designed, which means no appropriate methodology currently exists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51565/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 71 and 72 together. I propose to take Questions Nos. 71 and 72 together.

The carbon tax is one of many policies in place that are aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The Oireachtas has legislated, through the 2020 Finance Act, to progressively increase the rate of carbon tax each year so that it will reach a rate of €100 per tonne of carbon dioxide emissions by 2030. The increase in the rate by €7.50 in Budget 2022 brings the overall rate to €41 per tonne. The increase applied from 13 October 2021 for diesel and petrol, and will apply from 1 May 2022 for all other fuels to allow for the winter heating season.

A predictable schedule of carbon tax increases, in conjunction with other measures such as investment in active mobility and energy efficiency measures, and a progressive replacement of the private car fleet to electric vehicles, will allow households and businesses to plan for increases in carbon tax and, over time, this will change consumption and investment decisions.

On foot of a commitment in the Programme for Government, the ESRI published a report entitled, “Carbon taxes, poverty and compensation options,” on 13 October 2020. The report identified a series of targeted direct social protection payment interventions that could be used to address the effects an increase in the price of fossil fuels would have on lower income households and examined the effect of each of these. This report subsequently informed the introduction of a number of social welfare measures in Budget 2021 designed to mitigate the impact of increasing the rates of carbon tax on lower income households.

This year’s carbon tax increase was again accompanied by a series of parallel measures, introduced by the Minister for Social Protection in Budget 2022, intended to assist low-income households:

- an increase to the Qualified Child Payment of €2 per week for children under 12, and €3 per week for children over 12;
- an increase in the Living Alone Allowance of €3 per week;
- an increase to the Fuel Allowance of €5 per week; and
- an increase in the income threshold for the Working Family Payment of €10 per week.

My Department defines energy poverty as an inability to heat or power a home to an adequate degree. It is currently measured as a requirement to spend more than 10% of a household’s income on energy needs, which is an accepted and recognised method of assessing the likely level of energy poverty. The ESRI carried out an analysis of the number of households at risk of experiencing energy poverty in 2019 and again in 2020. This showed that the share of households needing to spend more than 10% of their income on their energy needs was 17.5% in 2020.

While the ESRI report referred to above updates the measurement of energy poverty to 2020 levels, it did not specifically link this measurement to a proposed approach for the redistribution of carbon tax revenues. Instead the report noted that, due to difficulties with measuring energy poverty with accuracy, there is a compelling case for focusing on the net impact of any rise in the carbon tax on more established measures of poverty, such as the official at risk-of-poverty rate. The report shows that by doing this it is possible to raise the carbon tax while reducing

poverty in general. It is important to note that the ESRI has also previously found that energy poverty and poverty in general are closely linked in Ireland and, that by targeting supports towards those at risk of poverty, it is likely that those in energy poverty are also supported. In line with this, Government supports for those at risk of energy poverty focus on both income supports and energy efficiency upgrades. Free energy efficiency upgrades are only available to those in receipt of certain welfare payments and those living in social housing, meaning that the support is targeted to lower income households. A review of the implementation of the Strategy to Combat Energy Poverty will be completed this year and will inform next steps in relation to the development of a new strategy.

Question No. 72 answered with Question No. 71.

National Broadband Plan

73. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when a village (details supplied) will be connected by National Broadband Ireland; if this has changed to the initial plan in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51587/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): The High Speed Broadband Map, which is available at www.broadband.gov.ie, shows the areas which will be included in the National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led intervention as well as areas targeted by commercial operators. The map is colour coded and searchable by address and Eircode. - Premises in the AMBER area will be provided with high speed broadband through the State led Intervention delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI).

- The BLUE area represents those areas where commercial providers are either currently delivering or have plans to deliver high speed broadband services.

I am advised that while a small number of premises in the village of Ahascragh are in the AMBER area, the majority of premises are designated as part of the BLUE area. BLUE areas are not included in the State intervention area covered by the NBP as commercial operators are already providing high speed broadband or have indicated future plans to do so. My Department defines high speed broadband as a connection with minimum speeds of 30Mbps download and 6Mbps upload. The activities of commercial operators delivering high speed broadband within BLUE areas are not planned or funded by the State and my Department has no statutory authority to intervene in that regard.

In terms of those premises in the townland of Lowville, Ahascragh that are designated as AMBER, I am advised by NBI that deployment to this area has already occurred and that these premises should now be able to place an order for high speed broadband from retail service providers who will deliver services to end users through the NBI network.

National Broadband Plan

74. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when a property (details supplied) will be connected by National Broadband Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51588/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communica-

tions (Deputy Ossian Smyth): The premises referred to in the Question is located in the BLUE area on the NBP High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website at www.broadband.gov.ie BLUE areas are not included in the State intervention area covered by the National Broadband Plan as commercial operators are already providing high speed broadband or have indicated future plans to do so. My Department defines high speed broadband as a connection with minimum speeds of 30Mbps download and 6Mbps upload. The activities of commercial operators delivering high speed broadband within BLUE areas are not planned or funded by the State and my Department has no statutory authority to intervene in that regard. Complaints about service provision are a matter to be dealt with between the consumer and the service provider in the first instance. If this avenue has been exhausted without a satisfactory resolution, the Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg) may be able to assist further. ComReg is the independent body that issues licences to broadband service providers and investigates complaints to make sure that companies are delivering services in line with their licence obligations.

Notwithstanding this, my Department has investigated the matter and from our records we have established that the premises should be able to obtain broadband speeds of 40Mbps through a commercial operator operating in the area.

National Broadband Plan

75. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 222 of 3 June 2021 and 41 of 16 September 2021, the number of premises connected by National Broadband Ireland, not surveyed, not ready for connection, but connected to date in counties Roscommon and Galway. [51589/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): I understand that almost 3,500 orders have been placed with NBI as of 8 October, with some 2,246 connections made. These include premises in Co. Galway. I am further advised that connections are due to commence in Co Roscommon next month.

Departmental Programmes

76. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the expected timeframe for the finalisation of proposals to guide the future direction and work programme of the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce; the groups the engagement has taken place with; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51614/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): My Department, in collaboration with the Department of Rural and Community Development is finalising a future work programme to progress the work of the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce. This work has been informed by ongoing engagement by the two Departments at both national and local Government level and with industry. I expect the work programme to be finalised in the coming weeks.

Transport Policy

77. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Transport if an update will be provided on the reliability of supply chains in Ireland. [51591/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): International supply chains are currently under considerable strain as global economies emerge from Covid. Ireland's international supply chains are similarly challenged.

In relation to shipping, shipping costs across the globe have risen considerably. This is largely attributed to the disruption caused to the global supply chains by the COVID-19 pandemic. On a more local level, the end of the Brexit transition also represented an inevitable disruption to normal trade flows as businesses adjust to the effect of the UK becoming a third country.

In the first half of 2021, the volume of goods traded globally increased significantly as economies reopened. Surging demand coupled with moderate supply growth caused upward pressure on shipping charter rates. The surging demand was evident on all major containership routes. Disruption to supply lines during initial waves of the pandemic has meant that capacity in the containership industry has not kept pace with demand, driving shipping charter rates upward.

Within the aviation sector, cargo-only flights continued to operate during COVID but the grounding of the majority of scheduled passenger services, with the consequential loss of bellyhold capacity, had a significant impact on the price of air cargo. I expect to see a phased re-introduction of a number of European routes from Dublin towards year-end. Together with the impending relaxation of US travel restrictions, we should see an increase in capacity for belly hold air cargo over the coming months.

In the road haulage sector, the demand for use of the UK landbridge for accessing EU markets has fallen considerably as a result of Brexit. This has driven the simultaneous decline in Ireland-GB traffic and an increase in direct Ireland-EU traffic. However, land borders across the EU remain fully open and no delays, outside of the norm, are being seen.

There is however a shortage of HGV drivers. This is not an issue confined to Ireland, but has been a growing issue across Europe and globally for number of years. It has been exacerbated in an Irish context by COVID and Brexit. Both the Irish Road Haulage Association and Freight Transport Association of Ireland have informed my Department that Irish road transport operators are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain qualified HGV drivers from Irish labour supply and from abroad.

Overall, like many countries across the EU and globally, Ireland's supply chain remains under considerable strain. In terms of mitigating actions, my Department has and continues to meet with stakeholders from the shipping, aviation, haulage and exporter associations in relation to the range of issues they are experiencing, and rapidly responding to, due to Covid and Brexit. In relation to shipping supply lines, the Irish Maritime Development Office continues to monitor maritime traffic, trade and the global shipping market data.

In aviation, as part of Budget 2022, the Government announced a substantial aviation package of €90m to be used by state airports to further incentivise the restoration of connectivity and associated bellyhold capacity.

In response to HGV driver shortages, a National Logistics and Supply Chain Skills Group is in place since 2019 and various actions have already been taken by the Group in collaboration with the industry to promote the training opportunities available. In addition, Minister of State Hildegard Naughton has asked the Group to examine the driver shortage problem and to make recommendations for mitigation. A number of interim actions are already being progressed including the acceleration of HGV driver licence exchange agreements with additional non-EEA countries.

Departmental Contracts

78. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Transport if he or any official from his Department has held meetings or conducted correspondence with a company (details supplied) from 1 January 2017 to date; if his Department has engaged the services of the company for any purposes from 1 January 2017 to date; if so, the nature of such services and the costs incurred; if a tender process was conducted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51364/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Neither I, nor any official from my Department has held meetings or conducted correspondence with the company named in the period 1 January 2017 to date, as far as I am aware.

Bus Services

79. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport his views on a proposal for an electric bus in Killarney, County Kerry (details supplied); if there is a grant available to get the bus up and running; and the steps that can be taken to progress the matter. [51434/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Providing a sustainable, low-carbon transport system is a key priority of the Irish Government. The Programme for Government commits to 7% average annual emissions reduction to 2030; ultimately, the goal is for a zero-emission mobility system by 2050. Decarbonisation of heavy-duty vehicles will be key to achieving this objective in the transport sector.

To promote the decarbonisation of the heavy-duty sector, my Department launched a new Alternatively-Fuelled Heavy-Duty Vehicle (AFHDV) Purchase Grant Scheme on 15 March 2021. The Scheme, which is administered by TII, is intended to help bridge some of the difference in purchase price between conventional heavy-duty vehicles (HDVs) and those powered by alternatively-fuelled power-trains. To accord with EU State Aid rules, grant levels under the Scheme are calculated as a percentage of the difference in price between a conventionally-fuelled diesel HDV and its alternatively-fuelled equivalent. Maximum grant levels for eligible vehicles depend on the size of the enterprise applying for the grant.

€2m was allocated to this scheme in 2021 and given the excellent response to the initiative, my Department allocated an additional €1m in funds this year to assist the heavy-duty vehicle sector in its transition to zero-mobility. Funds for 2021 have now been fully allocated however the scheme will continue in 2022 with further funding available. Details on how to apply for funding in January 2022 will be available shortly.

Rail Network

80. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Transport if there are plans for the train station office in Sallins, County Kildare to be reopened and staffed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51460/21]

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

The issue raised is an operational matter for Iarnród Éireann, in conjunction with the National Transport Authority (NTA), and I have forwarded the Deputy's question to Iarnród Éire-

ann for direct reply.

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

Driver Test

81. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Transport if priority will be given to students commuting to third-level due to unavailability of accommodation who have applied to sit the driving test; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51543/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The operation of the Driver Testing Service is the statutory responsibility of the Road Safety Authority (RSA). The protocol for scheduling appointments is an operational matter for the Road Safety Authority, and one in which I have no role.

I am therefore passing the Deputy's question to the Road Safety Authority for direct reply. If a reply has not been received within 10 working days, the Deputy should contact my office.

Illicit Trade

82. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Finance the efforts being made to tackle the sale of cigarettes on the black market in view of rising costs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51594/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that they use a range of measures to tackle the sale of illicit cigarettes on the black market. At the core of these measures is identifying and targeting the smuggling of illicit tobacco products into the State, with a view to disrupting the supply chain, seizing the products and, where possible, prosecuting those involved. Revenue's strategy involves developing and sharing intelligence on a national, EU and international basis, the use of analytics and detection technologies and ensuring the optimum deployment of resources on a risk-focused basis. In that context, I am aware that Revenue monitors trends in the illicit tobacco trade on an ongoing basis and adjusts its actions and redeploys its resources in response to new developments or methodologies employed by the criminal gangs involved in that trade.

Revenue has achieved considerable success in tackling the illicit tobacco trade. In 2020, it seized 48.2 million cigarettes valued at €32.8 million. In the same year, it obtained 35 summary and one indictable conviction relating to the sale of illicit tobacco, with fines of €83,500 imposed. In addition, there were 8 convictions relating to tobacco smuggling in 2020, 4 of which were on indictment, with fines of €10,000 imposed.

To the end of September 2021, Revenue seized 42.4m cigarettes valued at €30m. In addition, it obtained 22 summary convictions relating to the sale of illicit tobacco with fines of €51,750 imposed, and 8 summary tobacco smuggling convictions with fines of €20,000 imposed.

The smuggling of tobacco products is an illegal transnational activity. The production and distribution of illicit cigarettes crosses international boundaries. In response Revenue, in conjunction with national and international partners, undertake a programme of activity to counter those involved in such illegal activity. Considerable success has been achieved internationally as a result of the Revenue programme of work in this area. In June 2021, Revenue identified illicit movements of raw tobacco and engaged in international operations that led to the seizure of 6.5 tonnes of tobacco in Glasgow and the identification and dismantling of a counterfeit

hand-rolling tobacco factory in Stoke-on-Trent. In July 2021, as a result of a significant operation between Revenue and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), an illicit cigarette manufacturing facility was identified in Northern Ireland, leading to the seizure of 1.6 million cigarettes and 11 tonnes of tobacco along with non-tobacco materials used in the manufacturing process.

In addition, Revenue engages in joint operations with international partners, including OLAF (the EU's anti-fraud agency), Europol and the World Customs Organisation in countering the activities of those involved in the illicit international tobacco trade.

I am satisfied that Revenue is very conscious of the threat that tobacco smuggling poses to health, to legitimate business interests and to the Exchequer. I commend Revenue and all the relevant State agencies for their work in this important area and I am satisfied that there is an appropriate focus on tackling this form of criminality.

Departmental Contracts

83. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Finance if he or any official from his Department has held meetings or conducted correspondence with a company (details supplied) from 1 January 2017 to date; if his Department has engaged the services of the company for any purposes from 1 January 2017 to date; if so, the nature of such services and the costs incurred; if a tender process was conducted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51354/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Deputy, in relation to your question concerning Kinzen Limited previously known as Neva Labs, I wish to advise that no meetings have been held and no correspondence has been conducted with this company, either by myself or by any official from my Department.

I can also confirm that my Department has not engaged the services of Kinzen Limited previously known as Neva Labs and that no payment has been made to this company.

Tax Code

84. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department will ensure e-cigarettes and other so-called risk products are taxed at the same rate as traditional cigarettes in the forthcoming review of the EU Tobacco Excise Directive to make them less attractive to young smokers following publication of data from the Food and Drug Administration in the United States of America showing disposable e-cigarettes use among high school students increased from 2.6% in 2019 to 26.5% in 2020, a 1,000% increase; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51409/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Council Directive 2011/64/EU sets out EU rules on the structure and rates of excise duty applied to manufactured tobacco. The Directive defines and classifies various manufactured tobacco products according to their characteristics and lays down the relevant minimum rates of excise duty for the different types of products. The purpose of the Directive is to ensure the proper functioning of the internal market and a high level of health protection.

Every four years, the European Commission is required to submit a report to the Council on the rates and the structure of excise duties, accompanied – where appropriate – by a proposal for the revision of the Directive. The latest report was prepared by the Commission on 10 February

2020 and on 2 June 2020 the Council approved conclusions setting out its priorities in relation to the review of the Directive. A public consultation, open between 30 March 2021 and 22 June 2021, sought to ensure that all relevant stakeholders had an opportunity to express their views on the current rules and on possible changes to these rules. The Commission is expected to bring forward a new legislative proposal later this year or early in 2022 and the impact of this can be assessed when the proposal is available.

The Commission Report and the Council conclude that it is necessary to upgrade the EU regulatory framework, in order to tackle current and future challenges in respect of the functioning of the internal market by harmonising definitions and tax treatment of novel products (such as liquids for e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products), including products that substitute tobacco, in order to avoid legal uncertainty and regulatory disparities in the EU. Revision can also address the issue of tax-induced substitution across products and enable further measures to combat the illicit trade in tobacco to address tax control, revenue collection and health protection issues.

Ireland welcomes the review of the Directive to ensure that the rules remain fit for purpose, safeguard the proper functioning of the internal market and, very importantly, provide for a high level of health protection. This latter point is particularly significant in the context of the plan in the Programme for Government to introduce a targeted taxation regime to specifically discourage ‘vaping’ and e-cigarettes as well as in the European Action Plan against Cancer and our own national policy, Tobacco Free Ireland, both of which recognise that taxation plays a pivotal role in reducing tobacco consumption, in particular in deterring youth from smoking.

Ireland is committed to a policy of high taxation of tobacco to encourage people to quit smoking. Government health and social policy has focused on the further denormalisation of smoking generally as consumption of tobacco products remains one of the greatest avoidable and preventable health risks in our society. Similar considerations arise in respect of e-cigarette products and other alternative products.

Customs and Excise

85. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Finance the reason Ireland has remained an outlier to date in adopting legislation (details supplied); the reason the Revenue Commissioners and customs and excise departments have signalled an inability to adopt rebates or new pricing controls for a period of years if such an order should be passed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51462/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Council Directive 92/83/EEC, also known as the “Alcohol Structures Directive”, lays down a harmonised approach for the application of excise duties on alcohol and alcoholic beverages in the EU. It sets out the categories of alcohol and alcoholic beverages that fall within scope of taxation and the basis on which excise duties on such products are to be established. Council Directive 2020/1151 amends Directive 92/83/EEC and includes a new Article 13a which allows Member States the option to grant up to 50% excise relief to independent small producers of fermented beverages such as cider. The amendments to the Directive do not take effect until 1 January 2022. Therefore, I am not in a position to introduce any excise relief measures for small producers of fermented beverages such as cider until after this date.

Up until this point, it has not been possible to offer reduced rates to small producers of cider, in the same way as applies to small producers of beer, as the application of Article 4 of the Directive is restricted to beer. Ireland is not an outlier, as other Member States have been in the

same position. Ireland fully supported the introduction of amendments to the Directive to allow Member States introduce excise reliefs for small producers of cider. As I outlined in my Budget Speech last week, I see the introduction of such a relief as having a similar positive effect as that provided for small independent producers of beer.

The new Article 13a is structured differently to what is permitted under Article 4. Therefore, the existing relief in Irish legislation for beer could not be simply extended to cider. It will be necessary to provide a separate new relief, which would be similar in concept but different in detail. While this measure will be broadly modelled on the existing relief arrangements for beer, further considerations will need to be given to ensure clarity in relation to scope of the relief and also to its design and implementation so as to minimise the administrative burden and any compliance risks. My Department is considering these matters further and will engage with the sector and with the Revenue Commissioners over the coming months. As I indicated in the Budget, I plan to bring forward the relevant legislative amendments in Finance Bill 2022.

Customs and Excise

86. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will provide a Departmental analysis of the possible cost in taxes foregone in implementing EU Structures Directive 2020/1151 in relation to excise rebates to small scale producers of cider and other fermented beverages; if his Department can also provide an analysis in overall market terms of the value of taxes presently derived from this sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51463/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am informed by Revenue that the necessary data are not provided on tax returns to enable an accurate estimate of the cost of extending the 50% excise relief (available to qualifying microbreweries) to cider brewers and other fermented beverage manufacturers.

The following table sets out the value of Alcohol Products Tax (APT) relief for beer produced in qualifying microbreweries for the years 2017 to 2020.

Year	Value of Relief €m
2017	5.7
2018	5.8
2019	6.1
2020	5.8

The following table sets out the overall volumes of beer and cider/perry charged to APT for the years 2017 to 2020 and the associated receipts.

	Beer		Cider/Perry	
Year	Millions of Hectolitres	APT Receipts €m	Millions of Hectolitres	APT Receipts €m
2017	4.5	423.8	0.64	61.1
2018	4.62	430.1	0.643	61.2
2019	4.529	421.4	0.632	59.9
2020	3.745	351.1	0.559	53

Additional information on volumes and receipts for excisable products is available on the

Revenue website at www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/excise/index.aspx.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

87. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Finance if State supports are taken into account when assessing eligibility for the employment wage subsidy scheme (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51583/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Section 28B of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 provides for the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) which is an economy-wide enterprise support for eligible businesses. The Finance (Covid-19 and Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2021, signed into law on 19 July, provided for the extension of EWSS to 31 December 2021, ensuring that the scheme continues to provide ongoing and necessary employment support for eligible businesses as the economy returns to a full re-opening. In my Budget Day announcement, I confirmed that the scheme would continue to operate in a graduated form until 30 April 2022.

The EWSS legislation provides that for employers to be eligible for the EWSS, they must be able to demonstrate that their business will experience a 30% reduction in turnover or customer orders for the calendar year 2021 compared to the calendar year 2019 and that this disruption to normal business is caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The employer can self-assess for EWSS eligibility on the basis that there has been at least a 30% reduction in the turnover of the business or customer orders. I have been advised by Revenue that if a reduction in customer orders is the basis to determine eligibility, as a transport operator, the business must demonstrate at least a 30% reduction in the following:

- the volume of online bookings for passenger journeys; or
- the number of passenger journeys; or
- the value of passenger ticket sales.

Where a reduction in turnover is the basis to determine eligibility, when undertaking a review of the potential reduction in turnover, employers need to include all sources of trade income specifically including sales, donations, State funding, etc. This would include income from fares, Free Travel Schemes and potentially NTA funding support. However, the treatment of Government grants and public funding for the purposes of determining a reduction in turnover is dependent on the nature of the grant or funding arrangement. In reviewing their eligibility, employers should consider the specific nature and terms of the funding arrangement having regard to the applicable accounting standards and required recognition treatment of such grants or public funding arrangements.

The EWSS legislation requires that immediately at the end of each month, from the introduction of the scheme in August 2020 onwards, each employer availing of the scheme must carry out a self-review of its business circumstances and if it is manifest to the employer that it no longer meets the eligibility test for qualification for the scheme, then the employer must immediately cease claiming wage subsidy payments.

To assist employers in conducting a monthly review of its continuing eligibility for the scheme, Revenue is providing an EWSS Eligibility Review Form through its Revenue Online Service (ROS). From 21 July 2021, completing and submitting an EWSS Eligibility Review

Form to Revenue is necessary to avail of EWSS supports, with details of an employer's monthly eligibility review check to be submitted by the 15th of the following month.

Timely submission of the form will provide assurance to both employers and Revenue that subsequent EWSS claims are appropriate and in line with the terms of the scheme. This, together with Revenue's EWSS ongoing real-time compliance program, will reduce the possibility of employers, inadvertently or incorrectly, claiming EWSS amounts to which they are not entitled and having to subsequently repay those amounts to Revenue.

Any employers who have queries relating to the EWSS eligibility criteria should contact the Revenue office that deals with their tax affairs for assistance. In addition, detailed information relating to amounts to be included in the calculation of turnover for EWSS purposes is set out in Revenue's published eligibility guidelines which can be found at: www.revenue.ie/en/employing-people/documents/ewss/ewss-guidelines.pdf.

Tax Code

88. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Finance if he will introduce a two-tier stamp duty rate for land with a reduced rate applying to active farmers who work the land directly in order to increase output and production; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51584/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The current stamp duty rate for non-residential property, which includes agricultural land, is 7.5%.

Farming is first and foremost a business, and indeed section 655 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 states "For the purposes of the Tax Acts, farming shall be treated as the carrying on of a trade or, as the case may be, of part of a trade, and the profits or gains of farming shall be charged to tax under Case I of Schedule D." It is therefore appropriate for acquisitions of farmland to be subject, in the normal course of events, to the rate of stamp duty applicable to other non-residential property.

However, in respect of agricultural land, there are a range of generous and targeted reliefs from stamp duty, specific to that type of property, which remove in full or reduce the rate of stamp duty payable on the acquisition of farmland, currently available. These include the young trained farmer stamp duty relief, consanguinity relief and farm consolidation relief. These reliefs are kept under regular review by my department, and are renewed, updated and added to in line with Government policy and prevailing circumstances, when necessary.

I have no plans to introduce a special stamp duty rate for active farmers or for agricultural land.

Tax Code

89. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Finance if he will introduce a tax incentivisation scheme that facilitates owners and purchasers of town centre commercial buildings convert them into residential properties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51585/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Housing for All Strategy was developed in consultation with all relevant Government Departments, including my own. The measures set out in the strategy, together with the associated timeframes for delivery, represent the current actions for priority attention in order to increase the supply of residential property.

Having said this, the Deputy will be aware of the Living City Initiative (LCI). The LCI is specifically aimed at the regeneration of the historic inner cities of Dublin, Cork, Galway, Kilkenny, Limerick and Waterford. The scheme provides income or corporation tax relief for qualifying expenditure incurred in refurbishing/converting of qualifying buildings, including for residential purposes, which are located within pre-determined 'Special Regeneration Areas' (SRAs).

There are three types of relief available:

- Owner-occupier residential relief;
- Rented residential relief; and,
- Commercial/Retail relief.

In 2016 officials from my Department reviewed the measure in consultation with the relevant councils and the then Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. On foot of that review, a number of changes were brought forward in Budget 2017 in order to make the initiative more attractive and effective. The principal change extended the residential element of the scheme to landlords, who may now claim the relief by way of accelerated capital allowances for the conversion and refurbishment of property, which was built prior to 1915, where such property is to be used for residential purposes.

In relation to property-based reliefs more generally, taxation is only one of the policy levers available to the Government through which to boost overall housing supply. In line with my Department's Tax Expenditure Guidelines, consideration of whether a tax measure is the most appropriate policy tool for a given purpose is required. The presumption should be that non-tax measures should be considered before the use of a tax-based measure. The primary responsibility for direct expenditure based policy in this area lies with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Finally, Ireland's past experience with tax incentives in this sector strongly suggests the need for a cautionary stance.

Tax Code

90. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Finance if he is satisfied with the way in which the obligations for the new valuation period of 2022 to 2025 for the local property tax was communicated to taxpayers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51609/21]

91. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Finance if additional supports will be made available to older persons who may have had family members avail of the local property tax online options previously and who remain unaware of the obligations for the new valuation period of 2022 to 2025; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51610/21]

92. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Finance if taxpayers can defer the obligations for the new valuation period of 2022 to 2025 for the local property tax if they were unaware of the notice; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51611/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 90, 91 and 92 together.

Local Property Tax (LPT) is a self-assessed tax. As such, for the new 'valuation period' of 2022 to 2025, it is a matter for residential property owners themselves to determine the market

value of their property as at 1 November 2021, calculate the LPT due and submit an LPT Return to Revenue by 7 November 2021. This is the case regardless of whether a property owner has received a formal notification from Revenue or not.

However, I am advised that Revenue has issued over 1.4 million notices to property owners, setting out what is required to meet Local Property Tax (LPT) obligations for the new 'valuation period'. This includes approximately 200,000 hard-copy LPT returns to property owners who have not previously availed of the online options and may not be able to avail of, access or use the LPT online services.

In recent weeks, Revenue has commenced a comprehensive LPT media campaign, highlighting the obligations for the new 'valuation period' and the assistance available to enable property owners to fulfil their LPT obligations. Revenue spokespeople have taken part in several national and local media interviews and continue to do so. The LPT media campaign will continue over the coming weeks, in the lead up to the 7 November filing date, using both print and digital channels. I am also advised that Revenue has actively engaged with various representative groups to further enhance the public communications campaign.

The Revenue website includes a dedicated page outlining what property owners are required to do for the new 'valuation period'. When determining the market value of a property for the new 'valuation period', property owners can use online sources, such as the Revenue interactive valuation tool, which can be found on the Revenue website. Other online sources include the Residential Property Price Register or property sales websites such as daft.ie and myhome.ie.

Where property owners cannot use these online facilities to value their properties, sources such as the property pages in newspapers (local and/or national) or checking the information displayed in local auctioneer offices can provide useful guidance. Property owners are not required to determine an exact valuation of their property, they are only required to value their properties within a 'valuation band'. There are 20 valuation bands, the first band is €0 - €200,000, the second band is €200,001 - €262,500 and all other valuation bands are €87,500 wide.

To assist property owners who may be experiencing difficulties meeting their Return filing obligations Revenue is operating an LPT Helpline (01-7383626), which operates from 9.30am to 4.30pm, Monday to Friday. Property owners who have not received a notice from Revenue, or a hard-copy LPT Return and are unable to file online should contact the Helpline for assistance.

As part of the service the Helpline agents will assist with both the Return filing and payment selection processes. In advance of calling the Helpline, property owners will need to have determined the market value of their property so that the Return can be completed. They should also have their PPSN, Property ID and PIN to hand. The Property ID and PIN numbers can be found on any LPT correspondence previously received from Revenue.

In relation to the deferral of any LPT obligations, the LPT regime includes arrangements whereby a person may opt to defer, or partially defer (50%), payment of the tax in certain circumstances. These circumstances include income level, hardship and personal insolvency. They do not include the circumstances the Deputy has referred to in Question No. 51611/21, i.e. where a person was unaware of their obligations for the new 'valuation period'. A liable person must make a claim for a payment deferral in writing to Revenue setting out his or her personal circumstances. Comprehensive information on the deferral arrangements are set out on the Revenue website.

Question No. 91 answered with Question No. 90.

Question No. 92 answered with Question No. 90.

Tax Code

93. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will address concerns that the current system of tax individualisation may be discriminatory in practice as it penalises one income married couples by making it necessary for them to pay more tax than two income married couples; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51624/21]

94. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider initiating a review of the current system of tax individualisation to ensure that it is not, either directly or indirectly, creating conditions in which it is more difficult for one spouse to remain at home without incurring additional tax liabilities as a one income married couple; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51625/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 93 and 94 together.

Background

Prior to 2000, income tax allowed for full joint assessment of married couples. This meant that the earner in a single income couple could use the combined tax credits and standard rate band available to both individuals – i.e. double the personal tax credit and rate band available to a single earner. As a result, where the primary earner of a couple had sufficient income to use the available reliefs in full, the second earner faced the marginal rate of tax from the first pound of income earned, which acted as a disincentive to workforce participation for second earners.

A process of moving towards an individualised system of income taxation began in the tax year 2000/2001 with the stated economic objectives of increasing labour force participation and reducing the numbers of workers paying the higher rates of income tax. Many European countries have made similar moves towards a partial or fully individualised income taxation system on the grounds that it improves equality and economic independence for women.

Individualisation was progressed to some extent in later years but never completed. The result is that we now have a hybrid system. Up to €9,000 of the standard-rate band can be transferred between spouses and the married personal tax credit, can be allocated in full to one spouse. Because the income tax system allows married couples to choose whether to be jointly or individually assessed, there can be a difference between the tax liabilities incurred by married couples on the same household income, depending on the method of assessment chosen.

However, in lieu of fully transferable rate bands, a Home Carer Tax Credit may be claimed where one spouse works primarily in the home to care for a dependent person, such as a child. This credit was introduced in the context of the move towards individualisation, in recognition of the choices made by families where one spouse stays at home to care for children or the elderly.

I would make the point that when looking at an issue such as individualisation there are a number of perspectives to consider, for example, on the one hand the points raised by the Deputy and also on the other hand the implications for labour force participation, in particular in respect of female participation in the labour market. There are of course other non-tax factors that also have significant impacts on female workforce participation, including the cost of

childcare.

My Department keeps the issue of individualisation of the income tax bands under review. Most recently, the matter was considered in 2019 as part of the Tax Strategy Group deliberations ahead of Budget 2020. However, I have no immediate plans to revisit issue.

Tax Code

The Tax Code sets out the basis on which an individual is assessed to tax and provides for a significant number of credits, reliefs and exemptions, eligibility for which is subject to a wide range of conditions. While the basis of assessment and the credits, reliefs and exemptions available vary depending on the facts and circumstances applicable in each specific case, there is no discrimination in the Tax Code.

Basis of Assessment

Parts 44 and 44A of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (TCA 1997) provide for joint assessment of a married couple or civil partners who live together. Where joint assessment applies, the couple are chargeable to tax on their combined total income. The couple may however apply to be assessed to tax separately, meaning that each individual is taxed as if he or she were not married or in a civil partnership. The couple may choose whichever basis of assessment is most beneficial to them, based on their personal circumstances.

Standard Rate Band

Section 15 of the TCA 1997 provides for the standard rate band, i.e. how much of an individual's income is liable to tax at 20%. For the 2021 year of assessment, the standard rate band is €35,300 per person. In the case of a married couple or civil partner, each individual is entitled to a standard rate band of €35,300.

If the couple is jointly assessed to tax and either spouse or civil partner has insufficient income to fully utilise his or her own standard rate band, he or she may transfer a portion of their unused rate band to their spouse or civil partner. The maximum portion of the standard rate band which one spouse or civil partner may transfer to the other is €9,000 and any excess unused rate band above this amount cannot be transferred. This is the case irrespective of whether the couple has one or two incomes.

Tax Credits, Reliefs and Exemptions

Part 15 of the TCA 1997 provides for a wide range of tax credits, reliefs and exemptions. Whether or not such credits, reliefs and exemptions are available to an individual or couple depends on the circumstances of the specific case and the eligibility criteria for the individual credit, relief or exemption.

One such credit is the basic personal tax credit, which is provided for in section 461 of the TCA 1997. For the 2021 year of assessment, the basic personal tax credit is valued at €1,650 per person. In the case of a married couple or civil partnership, each spouse or civil partner will be entitled to his or her own basic personal tax credit of €1,650. Again, this is the case irrespective of whether the couple has one or two incomes.

The home carer tax credit of €1,600 is available to married couples or civil partners that are jointly assessed, where one spouse or civil partner stays at home to take care of a dependent person. The carer may earn up to €7,200 per year without affecting the amount of the credit awarded. Where the carer's income exceeds €7,200, the amount of credit available is reduced by one half of the excess over €7,200, subject to a maximum income limit of €10,400.

Further information on the above may be accessed at the following links:

- Revenue website - www.revenue.ie/en/life-events-and-personal-circumstances/marital-status/marriage-and-civil-partnerships/index.aspx

- Tax and Duty Manual Part 44-01-01 - www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-44/44-01-01.pdf.

- Tax and Duty Manual Part 15-01-29 - www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-15/15-01-29.pdf

Question No. 94 answered with Question No. 93.

Banking Sector

95. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention or that of his officials has been drawn to reports (details supplied) that the Central Bank is using off balance sheet structures to help in the concealment of losses; and if he or his officials have engaged with the Central Bank regarding the number of IBRC transactions that keep losses and liabilities off balance sheet. [51675/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am aware that officials in my Department have sought clarification from the Deputy in relation to this parliamentary question. If the nature of the question is clarified, a further reply can be provided directly.

The details supplied to this parliamentary question also makes reference to a media article from 2020. Mr David Tynan of PwC was appointed to the role of Assessor pursuant to the Anglo Irish Bank Corporation Act 2009 in November 2018.

The Assessor's report was published on the Department of Finance website on 12 May 2020 and the overall conclusion of this report is that the fair and reasonable aggregate value of the transferred shares and the extinguished rights in the bank as at 15 January 2009 for the purposes of payment of fair and reasonable compensation for the acquisition of those shares and the extinction of those rights was nil and therefore, that no compensation is payable to former shareholders of any class or to former rights holders.

The Assessor was appointed pursuant to the Anglo Irish Bank Corporation Act 2009 (the "Act"). Under the Act the Assessor is required to determine this value having regard to the following items:

- on the basis of the true financial state of Anglo Irish Bank on 15 January 2009, taking into account the underlying market values of Anglo Irish Bank's assets and the extent of its actual, contingent and prospective liabilities on that date;

- having regard to the rights attaching to each class of transferred shares; and

- assuming that no financial assistance, investment or guarantee (other than the guarantee already provided under the Credit Institutions (Financial Support) Act 2008) would in future be provided to or made in Anglo Irish Bank, directly or indirectly, by the State.

The final report of the Anglo Irish Bank Assessor states that, in his opinion, absent the provision of recapitalisation funds from the Government that the former Anglo Irish Bank was unlikely to be able to continue to trade as it was "both cashflow and balance sheet insolvent", as at 15 January 2009.

The Project Atlas October 2008 report, which PwC prepared, was based on Anglo's IFRS balance sheet as at 30 September 2008 which was after the Government bank guarantee. The report stated that the balance sheet showed that the bank's assets exceeded its liabilities.

I note that the work conducted by the Assessor cannot be compared to the reports undertaken by PwC under Project Atlas given the different dates involved and the fact the Assessor's report was conducted on the assumption of no further future support being provided to the bank (in line with the requirements of the Act).

Departmental Contracts

96. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he or any official from his Department has held meetings or conducted correspondence with a company (details supplied) from 1 January 2017 to date; if his Department has engaged the services of the company for any purposes from 1 January 2017 to date; if so, the nature of such services and the costs incurred; if a tender process was conducted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51359/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department has not engaged any services from the named company during the period specified. I can also confirm that I have not engaged in any meetings or correspondence with the named company in my capacity as Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. This is also the position that applies to officials of the Department.

Departmental Data

97. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will provide details of the up-to-date Government research his Department holds on the use of carbon tax funds (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51561/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): In summer 2020, the Government asked the ESRI to undertake analysis to determine whether the Irish carbon tax could be increased in a progressive manner, with impacts on lower-income households and poverty offset through additional spending on social welfare supports.

The resulting ESRI research paper, "Carbon Taxes, Poverty and Compensation Options" published alongside Budget 2021 stated that expenditure levels of just €50m - €55m, less than one third of the expected revenues raised from a €7.50 increase, were sufficient to counteract the regressive nature of the increase. Allocations of this level would result in a reduction in the poverty rate and could leave the lowest two income deciles better off than before the increase.

In light of the ESRI research and the commitment to ensure that the carbon tax is progressive, the Government has committed to very significant increases in a targeted package of social protection supports in Budget 2022. These supports were selected to counteract the impact of the increased carbon tax on low income households. The specific measures are:

- An increase to the a Qualified Child Payment of €2 per week for children under 12 and €3 per week for children over 12 - This protects low income families and will reduce child poverty;

- An increase in the Living Alone Allowance of €3 per week - People living alone are often the elderly most at risk of poverty or people suffering from a disability. These groups are likely

to have higher energy needs than average;

- An increase to the Fuel Allowance of €5 per week - This will compensate a broad range of lower income households (since the Fuel Allowance is means-tested) for the additional energy costs they are likely to incur due to an increase in the carbon tax. This will be combined with a broadening of the threshold for Fuel Allowance eligibility and an increase in the income allowed for the means test that is applied to applicants;

- An increase in the income threshold for the Working Family Payment of €10 per week – Research has found that children in energy poverty have a greater likelihood of respiratory illness. Using carbon tax funds to compensate low paid employees with children will lead to improved health outcomes, particularly when combined with the qualifying child payment.

The total cost of these interventions is projected at €146m in 2022. This will be funded by the additional carbon tax funds of €105m that have been allocated to the Department of Social Protection, with the remaining €41m cost met by the Exchequer. This allocation is nearly triple the level of expenditure recommended by the ESRI to ensure that that carbon tax increase is progressive.

Analysis undertaken in my Department before the publication of Budget 2022 using SWITCH, the ESRI tax and benefit model, to simulate the impact of the carbon tax increase and the compensatory welfare package estimates that the net impact of the combined measures is progressive. Households in the bottom four income deciles will see all of the cost of the carbon tax increase offset, with the bottom three deciles being better off as a result of these measures. This is a tangible demonstration of the Government's commitment to achieving a Just Transition.

Economic and Social Research Institute

98. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his views on the Economic and Social Research Institute report entitled Carbon Taxes, Poverty and Compensation Options 2020 cited by his Department as proof that carbon tax increases leave the lowest income fifth of households on average better off and reduces poverty, fails to take into account the huge increase in energy prices since its publication; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51562/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): In summer 2020, the Government asked the ESRI to undertake analysis to determine whether the Irish carbon tax could be increased in a progressive manner, with impacts on lower-income households and poverty offset through additional spending on social welfare supports. The resulting report entitled "Carbon Taxes, Poverty and Compensation Options" paper examined how the Irish carbon tax can be raised without increasing poverty and disproportionately affecting low-income households.

The paper stated that expenditure levels of just €50m - €55m, less than one third of the expected revenues raised from a €7.50 increase, were sufficient to counteract the regressive nature of the increase. Allocations of this level would result in a reduction in the poverty rate and could leave the lowest two income deciles better off than before the increase.

In light of the ESRI research and the commitment to ensure that the carbon tax is progressive, the Government has committed to very significant increases in a targeted package of social protection supports in Budget 2022. These supports were selected to counteract the impact of the increased carbon tax on low income households. The specific measures are:

- An increase to the a Qualified Child Payment of €2 per week for children under 12 and €3 per week for children over 12 - This protects low income families and will reduce child poverty;

- An increase in the Living Alone Allowance of €3 per week - People living alone are often the elderly most at risk of poverty or people suffering from a disability. These groups are likely to have higher energy needs than average;

- An increase to the Fuel Allowance of €5 per week - This will compensate a broad range of lower income households (since the Fuel Allowance is means-tested) for the additional energy costs they are likely to incur due to an increase in the carbon tax. This will be combined with a broadening of the threshold for Fuel Allowance eligibility and an increase in the income allowed for the means test that is applied to applicants;

- An increase in the income threshold for the Working Family Payment of €10 per week – Research has found that children in energy poverty have a greater likelihood of respiratory illness. Using carbon tax funds to compensate low paid employees with children will lead to improved health outcomes, particularly when combined with the qualifying child payment.

The total cost of these interventions is projected at €146m in 2022. This will be funded by the additional carbon tax funds of €105m that have been allocated to the Department of Social Protection, with the remaining €41m cost met by the Exchequer.

The focus of the paper was exclusively on addressing the impact of carbon tax increases. However, the 2022 allocation is nearly triple the level of expenditure recommended by the ESRI to ensure that that carbon tax increase is progressive and follows a similarly sized package in Budget 2021.

This allocation of carbon tax revenue usage was announced in the context of a social welfare budget package worth an additional €558 million in 2022, with total spending on social protection measures expected to reach €23.3 billion. This is supplemented by a 100% Christmas bonus double payment to be paid in December 2021 at an estimated cost of over €313m and immediate implementation of the Fuel Allowance increases.

Analysis undertaken in my Department before the publication of Budget 2022 using SWITCH, the ESRI tax and benefit model, to simulate the impact of the carbon tax increase and the specific compensatory welfare package, estimates that the net impact of the combined measures is progressive. Households in the bottom four income deciles will see all of the cost of the carbon tax increase offset, with the bottom three deciles being better off as a result of these measures.

I also note that the ESRI in their analysis of Budget 2022, have stated that the budget measures overall will compensate most households for rising prices and will result in lower levels of poverty. The ESRI also specifically noted that the Budget contained well-targeted reforms with clear policy objectives,

Horticulture Sector

99. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if considerations have been given to plant nurseries in relation to carbon tax and the reuse of carbon by LPG generators; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51616/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The Programme for Government committed to increasing the carbon tax to €100 euro per tonne by

2030. It also committed to hypothecating all of the revenues arising from these increases. It is estimated that, over the decade, this will provide an additional €9.5bn in spending that would not otherwise be available.

As per the commitment in the Programme for Government, all of the revenue that will be raised by these increases in carbon tax will be used to:

- Ensure that the increases in the carbon tax are progressive by spending €3 billion on targeted social welfare and other initiatives to prevent fuel poverty and ensure a just transition (Department of Social Protection);

- Provide €5 billion to part fund a socially progressive national retrofitting programme (Department of Environment, Climate and Communications);

- Allocate €1.5bn of additional funding to encourage and incentivise farmers to farm in a greener and more sustainable way (Department of Agriculture).

The specific programme measures in each sector are a matter for those Ministers receiving funding.

Departmental Contracts

100. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she or any official from her Department has held meetings or conducted correspondence with a company (details supplied) from 1 January 2017 to date; if her Department has engaged the services of the company for any purposes from 1 January 2017 to date; if so, the nature of such services and the costs incurred; if a tender process was conducted; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51363/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I am advised that neither I nor any officials in my Department had any contact with the company identified by the Deputy during this period.

Sport and Recreational Development

101. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when the announcement for the sports capital grant will be made. [51366/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): The Sports Capital and Equipment Programme (SCEP) is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and physical recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country. The 2020 round of the SCEP closed for applications on Monday 1st March 2021. By the closing date, over 3,100 applications were submitted seeking over €200m in funding. This is the highest number of applications ever received.

The scoring system and assessment procedures were published earlier this year and all applications are being assessed accordingly. Approximately one thousand of the submitted applications were for 'equipment-only' projects. These applications were assessed first and grants with a total value of €16.6m were announced on the 6th August.

The remaining applications for capital works are now being assessed. This work is ongoing

with allocations for all successful applications expected to be announced in the coming months.

Tourism Policy

102. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will seek a reversal of Fáilte Ireland's decision to disband its food and drink team; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51482/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The issue raised by the Deputy is an operational matter for Fáilte Ireland and I have referred the Deputy's question to the agency for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Arts Policy

103. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if her attention has been drawn to the case of a person (details supplied); the process by which such an exclusion was made in this instance and could be made for others; the forms of entertainer other than musician, singer and ancillary crew for music that are eligible for the music and entertainment business assistance scheme; and if the term entertainment is limited to music and therefore not an accurate description of the intended recipients of the scheme. [51571/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I am acutely aware of the devastating impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the arts/culture and live entertainment sectors. I have engaged with numerous stakeholders in the sector during the course of the pandemic to ensure that appropriate supports were put in place.

To support the industry through this difficult period I have to date allocated funding for a suite of measures designed to sustain and support live performance and employment opportunities in the sector, including the Music and Entertainment Business Assistance Scheme (MEBAS).

The aim of the MEBAS scheme is to make a contribution to the overheads of businesses, whether sole traders, partnerships or incorporated entities operating exclusively within the live entertainment sector. Businesses of musicians and singers of all genres are eligible to apply, as are sound engineers, lighting engineers, audio engineers, stage managers, stage technicians, sound and lighting equipment suppliers, live-streaming equipment suppliers and full-time Disc Jockeys.

The initial phase of this scheme closed for applications on 30 September and I was pleased to launch a second phase of this scheme earlier this month.

The application the Deputy refers to relates to business activity outside the scope of this scheme. Officials in my Department have engaged with the applicant in relation to their application and the appeals process for this scheme.

Environmental Impact Assessments

104. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heri-

tage if the drainage and or reclamation of peatland systems in which more than two hectares of wetland habitat are affected fall under Schedule 5, Part 2, (1) Agriculture, Silviculture and Aquaculture (c) Development and if not, the reason therefor. [51581/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): Schedule 5 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as amended (the Regulations), and as referred to by the Deputy, is related to environmental impact assessment (EIA). The general provisions for which are set out in Section 172(1)(a) of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (the Act) as amended.

In accordance with the Act, an EIA must be carried out by a planning authority or An Bord Pleanála, as the case may be, in respect of an application for consent for proposed development of a class specified in Schedule 5 to the Regulations which

- equals or exceeds a quantity, area or other limit specified in that Schedule (the EIA threshold) or

- where no quantity, area or other limit is specified in that Part in respect of the development concerned.

In the case of sub-threshold development, an EIA will be required where it is concluded, determined or decided, as the case may be, by the relevant competent authority that the proposed development is likely to have a significant effect on the environment.

Schedule 5 of the Regulations transposes the list of projects in Annexes I and II of the EIA Directive and sets out the projects requiring an EIA to be carried out by the relevant competent authority.

“Wetlands” are defined in Article 5(1) of the Regulations as natural or artificial areas where biogeochemical functions depend notably on constant or periodic shallow inundation, or saturation, by standing or flowing fresh, brackish or saline water. In Class 1 of Part 2 of Schedule 5 to the Regulations, the relevant EIA threshold for “Agriculture, Silviculture and Aquaculture” for the purposes of Section 176 of Act, are set out. This includes at class (1)(c) development consisting of the carrying out of drainage and/or reclamation of wetlands where more than 2 hectares of wetlands would be affected. Exempted development thresholds for development consisting of the carrying out of drainage and/or reclamation of wetlands are set out at Class 11 of Part 3 of Schedule 2 of the Regulations.

Peat extraction is contained in the Planning and Development Regulations 2001 as a different class of development to the ‘drainage or reclamation of wetlands’. “Peat extraction” is defined in Article 3(3) of the Regulations as including any related drainage of bogland. The EIA threshold for peat extraction, pursuant to section 176 of the Act, is set out in class 2(a) of Part 2 of Schedule 5 of the Regulations, and the exempted development thresholds for peat extraction are set out at Class 17 of Part 3 of Schedule 2 of the Regulations.

The interpretation and application of planning legislation, including environmental impact assessment requirements, in any individual case is the function of the planning authorities and An Bord Pleanála, having regard to the particulars of the proposed development in question. Under section 30 of the Act, I am specifically precluded from exercising any power or control in relation to any particular case with which a planning authority or An Bord Pleanála is or may be concerned.

Housing Policy

105. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will temporarily suspend the limitations of usage on holiday homes in order to permit prospective tenants to reside in them in order to alleviate the housing crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51586/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): Under the Planning and Development Act, 2000, as amended (the Act), all development, unless specifically exempted under the Act or associated Regulations, requires planning permission.

In some cases, when the initial planning permission for a holiday home is sought, planning authorities have additionally specified by way of planning condition (such as an occupancy clause) that such holiday homes cannot be used for permanent residential purposes. It is considered that a change of use of a holiday home to a place of permanent residence would be a material change of use requiring planning permission. The carrying out of a material change of use from holiday home to a place of permanent residence without obtaining planning permission could be considered unauthorised development and subject to enforcement proceedings by the relevant planning authority under planning legislation.

If the owner of a holiday home wishes for the premises to be used as place of permanent residence, then they may lodge a planning application to the relevant planning authority for a change of use from holiday home to residential use. It is a matter for the planning authority to decide such applications on a case by case basis. When considering an application for planning permission for residential development or change of use, the planning authority is required to consider the local housing needs requirements policy as set out in the authority's Development Plan.

It should be noted that holiday homes are often located in more remote areas and/or may be on land which is specially zoned for such development in the Development Plan and/or Local Area Plan, e.g. a "resort" zoning, and which therefore may not be suitable for permanent residential development. Different design layouts and standards may also be applied to holiday homes than to permanent residential development and the planning authority's policies on rural housing may also apply differently to holiday homes than to permanent residential development, all of which the planning authority would have to consider when making a decision on a change of use application. Consequently, a proposal to change a holiday home to permanent residential housing could be found to be contrary to the principles of proper planning and sustainable development of the area in question.

I have no plans to amend the existing provisions in this regard at this point in time.

Departmental Contracts

106. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he or any official from his Department has held meetings or conducted correspondence with a company (details supplied) from 1 January 2017 to date; if his Department has engaged the services of the company for any purposes from 1 January 2017 to date; if so, the nature of such services and the costs incurred; if a tender process was conducted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51357/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):

The information requested in relation to my Department is currently being compiled in my Department and will be forwarded to the Deputy in accordance with Standing Orders.

Planning Issues

107. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the percentage of planning applications which have been screened for appropriate assessments in the past 12 months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51402/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): Planning statistics are compiled by each planning authority on an annual basis for collation and publication on my Department's website, at the following link:

www.gov.ie/en/service/9e4ee-get-planning-statistics/ .

The data collected relates to the total number of applications and decisions for all developments that require planning permission, broken down by year and planning authority but does not include specific information on appropriate assessments. Such information may be sought directly from the relevant planning authority.

However, section 177U of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, provides that every application for consent for a proposed development must be screened for appropriate assessment in order to assess, in view of best scientific knowledge, whether the proposed development would be likely to have a significant effect on a designated or candidate European site. Screening for appropriate assessment must be carried out by the relevant competent authority before consent for a proposed development is given.

Legislative Measures

108. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will provide an update on the recently announced comprehensive review of planning legislation; the details on those that are involved in the group conducting the review; the terms of reference; the timeline for completion of the review; and if there will be an opportunity for third party and Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage involvement in the review before it makes any recommendations to Government. [51459/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Housing for All sets out a number of objectives with the aim of improving the functioning of the planning system including the comprehensive review and consolidation of planning legislation. The review is being overseen by the Attorney General and he has established a working group of professionals with planning law expertise to assist him in this work.

The review forms one of the actions in Housing for All and is set in the context of the broad policy outlined therein and it is intended that it will be completed by December 2022.

My Department is currently establishing a Planning Advisory Forum which will be a key element of the planning review. It will manage the stakeholder engagement through the process and will be chaired by my colleague, Peter Burke, Minister of State with responsibility for Planning and Local Government. The overall aim of the planning review is to ensure the clarity and coherence of the legislation, and will aim to avoid unnecessary change. However, if significant policy issues emerge through this process, my Department will consider the need for consultation beyond the Planning Advisory Forum.

The primary aim of the Forum will be to engage with stakeholders on themes to input into the review of planning legislation. It is intended that the Forum will have a wide stakeholder membership to input to the evolving policy and legal agenda, with representatives from a broad range of sectors, including representation from the public sector, business, environmental, social and knowledge based sectors. My Department will shortly be contacting various groups and interested bodies to ask them to participate in it.

Pre-legislative scrutiny will be undertaken on any proposed legislation arising out of the review of planning legislation and views of the Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage will be considered as part of that process.

Local Authorities

109. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if an update will be provided on the Moorhead Report; and when the circular will be issued in relation to councillor's expenses and gratuities. [51531/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): On 1 July 2021, I, with the agreement of Mr Michael McGrath TD, Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, gave effect to new regulations made under section 142 of the Local Government Act 2001, as amended. The new regulations implemented proposals approved by Government to reform the remuneration payable to local councillors, which rebalanced financial supports away from expenses allowances in favour of more normal, taxable salaried income. This is in line with the Programme for Government commitment to implement the Moorhead Report within 12 months.

A circular was issued by my Department to local authorities on 30 June 2021 to notify them of the new regulations and the main provisions therein. Currently there is ongoing consultation between my Department and the Revenue Commissioners regarding the specific expenses and allowances payable to elected members. A further circular will issue to local authorities as soon as possible once this process has concluded.

In addition, a working group of key local government stakeholders, including councillor representative organisations, was established earlier this year tasked with drawing up an Action Plan for examination and implementation of the non-pay related recommendations in the Moorhead Report. An Action Plan was approved by the working group before the summer and the group has now turned its attention to the implementation of the actions agreed.

Addressing these non-pay issues, together with the significant pay reforms that were approved by Government and brought into effect on 1 July 2021, will facilitate the retention of existing councillors, while also maximising the accessibility of local government to future candidates.

Planning Issues

110. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the completion of the updated guidelines for rural planning; the expected timeframe for publication; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51612/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): The Guidelines for Planning Authorities on Sustainable Rural Hous-

ing 2005, were issued under section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 and require planning authorities to frame the planning policies in their development plans in a balanced and measured way that ensures the housing needs of rural communities are met, while avoiding excessive urban-generated housing. The Guidelines are available on the Government's website at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/publication/23809-sustainable-rural-housing-development-guidelines/.

Since 2018, the National Planning Framework (NPF) is the national planning policy document providing overall strategic policy for the future development of Ireland. National Planning Objective (NPO) 19 aims to ensure that a policy distinction is made between areas experiencing significant 'overspill' development pressure from urban areas within the commuter catchment of cities, towns and centres of employment, on the one hand, and remoter rural areas where population levels may be low and or declining, on the other.

NPO 19 is aligned with the established planning approach as per the 2005 Guidelines, whereby considerations of social (intrinsic part of the community) or economic (persons working full or part-time) need may be applied by planning authorities in certain rural areas under urban influence in order to prevent urban sprawl.

A working group was established to review and, where necessary, recommend changes to the 2005 Guidelines and this group met on five occasions between May 2017 and January 2019. During this period, in 2018, the National Planning Framework (the NPF) was published and provides an important strategic basis for interpreting the 2005 Guidelines. National Policy Objective (NPO) 15 of the NPF fully supports the concept of the sustainable development of rural areas by encouraging growth and arresting decline in areas that have experienced low population growth or decline in recent decades, while simultaneously indicating the need to manage certain areas around cities and towns.

Updated Rural Housing Planning Guidelines are currently being prepared by my Department to ensure consistency with new requirements and legislation at national and EU level introduced in respect of areas related to rural housing such as environmental protection, the Gaeltacht and climate action. The new guidelines will ensure a more consistent approach between counties and alignment with NPF objectives, and will be prepared in draft before the end of 2021.

Housing Policy

111. Deputy Catherine Murphy asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will provide a detailed explanation of the off-balance sheet techniques used by him or his officials, as referred to recently (details supplied), to benefit foreign investors and confer on them an advantage over Irish retail customers. [51674/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Government's new housing plan Housing For All (HfA) will see an increased provision of social housing with a much greater emphasis on new build by Local Authorities and an ending of long-term leasing of private accommodation by Local Authorities through phasing out new leasing projects and focussing on new-build to provide social homes.

During the lifetime of HfA, there will be a total of 3,500 homes secured through long term leasing. The overall annual targets will decrease from 1,300 homes in 2022 to 200 homes in 2025. The phasing out of leasing will allow us to address a greater proportion of social housing need in the short run within a tight budgetary environment whilst the other benefits of HfA

are being realised. As the programme is wound down, the additional units delivered through leasing in an off-balance sheet way will free up fiscal space for other spending requirements, including the housing capital programmes.

My Department is opposed to institutional investors purchasing inappropriate properties such as housing estates in bulk where there is no evidence of real additional supply. The Government has clearly signalled that they should not be competing with first time buyers and other home purchasers, and have taken urgent actions through a mix of planning and taxation measures to ensure this.

However, it should be noted that institutional investment in leasing represents a small proportion of total leasing output to date and an even smaller proportion of total housing output, although interest and engagement has been increasing. According to CBRE, the total number of residential units under institutional ownership in Ireland is estimated to be greater than 15,550 at the end of 2020 which equates to less than one percent of the total housing stock in Ireland (and approximately 5% of all rental tenancies). Also, a report by the Department of Finance in 2019 found that the combined purchasing activity of institutional investment in the general housing market was low – some 1% of total activity in 2017.

Departmental Contracts

112. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he or any official from his Department has held meetings or conducted correspondence with a company (details supplied) from 1 January 2017 to date; if his Department has engaged the services of the company for any purposes from 1 January 2017 to date; if so, the nature of such services and the costs incurred; if a tender process was conducted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51355/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department has not held meetings or conducted correspondence with the company referred to by the Deputy nor has it engaged the services of that company for any purposes from 1 January 2017 to date.

Human Rights

113. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his attention has been drawn to the six Palestinian prisoners who are on hunger strike to protest their administrative detention and imprisonment without charges or formal trial; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51389/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am aware of the cases to which the Deputy refers, including the concerns raised by the International Committee of the Red Cross regarding the health of two of the detainees. Irish officials are monitoring this matter closely, in cooperation with partners on the ground.

Ireland, and our partners across the EU, have repeatedly raised the treatment of Palestinian prisoners with the Israeli authorities. Ireland and the EU also provide financial support to Israeli and Palestinian civil society partners who are active in bringing these issues to light.

At the Human Rights Council, Ireland has called on the Israeli authorities, in accordance with their obligations under Article 9 of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to refrain from conducting arbitrary arrests and to follow the acceptable procedure es-

established by law regarding arrest and detention, most recently at the 46th session of the Council in February.

I, and my officials, regularly raise human rights issues in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory at the highest levels, and have done so directly with Israeli counterparts. I will continue to press on these issues.

Passport Services

114. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the current waiting list for passport applications for applicants resident in County Wicklow; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51423/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): There are currently 2,192 passport applications from County Wicklow on hand with the Passport Service. All passport applications are processed based on date of receipt and application type irrespective of country or county of origin.

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 applications received via AN Post's "Passport Express" service

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

The Passport Service is currently experiencing a high demand for first time passports. In order to protect the integrity of the Irish Passport, such applications require careful processing to validate the identity of the applicant and their entitlement to Irish citizenship for the first time. Additionally, in the case of children, consent of all guardians, must be validated.

In line with our continued scaling up of services, the Passport Office in Mount Street resumed its Urgent Appointment Service for renewal of Passports on Monday, 27 September 2021. This service is available to people who unexpectedly require their passport renewed at short notice and opt for this fee-based service to do so. To avail of this service, members of the public can visit my Department's website at www.dfa.ie/passports and book an appointment to attend the public office in Mount Street, Dublin 2. The service is available for two types of appointment: same-day turnaround and four-day turnaround. A fee applies to the appointment service, relative to how quickly a passport renewal is required.

The Passport Service continues to maintain its emergency service for those who require a passport for a medical emergency or death of a family member abroad.

Passport Services

115. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a passport will be expedited for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51469/21]

116. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** 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. [51508/21]

117. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a passport will be issued in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51566/21]

118. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a passport will be issued in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51567/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 115, 116, 117 and 118 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.

Question No. 116 answered with Question No. 115.

Question No. 117 answered with Question No. 115.

Question No. 118 answered with Question No. 115.

Passport Services

119. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a passport will be issued in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51568/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): With regard to the specific application about which the Deputy has enquired, the Passport Service has issued a passport to the applicant.

Departmental Contracts

120. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Defence if he or any official from his Department has held meetings or conducted correspondence with a company (details supplied) from 1 January 2017 to date; if his Department has engaged the services of the company for any purposes from 1 January 2017 to date; if so, the nature of such services and the costs incurred; if a tender process was conducted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51350/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department has not held meetings or conducted correspondence with the company referred to by the Deputy nor has it engaged the services of that company for any purposes from 1 January 2017 to date.

Defence Forces

121. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the progress made in the appointment of a confidential contact person for survivors of abuse, harassment and bullying within the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51690/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): As the Deputy is aware, I met recently with participants from the Women of Honour group and a group of serving female members of the Defence Forces, where I had the opportunity to listen carefully to their experiences, in what were very informative meetings. In addition, participants from the Women of Honour group have met with the Secretary General and senior officials from my Department and I understand these were also productive meetings.

I have given a commitment that an Independent Review will be undertaken by external and entirely independent and unbiased experts in this field, to examine the effectiveness of the policies, systems and procedures currently in place for dealing with bullying, harassment, discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual assault in the Defence Forces. I will shortly be inviting the participants of Women of Honour Group, serving members of the Defence Forces and other stakeholders, including the Representative Associations to input into the finalisation of the Terms.

I have also recently announced on 6 October last, interim measures to support both former and serving members of the Defence Forces who have been affected by unacceptable behaviour in the workplace. Former members of the Defence Forces, both male and female, affected by any of the issues raised, are being advised to note details of these supports.

An agreement has been reached with RaiseaConcern, an organisation working with private sector and public bodies on issues relating to workplace wrongdoing, on the appointment of an external and independent Confidential Contact Person (CCP) who will be available to assist members of the Defence Forces who may find themselves the victim of bullying, harassment, sexual harassment or discrimination in the workplace. This will provide a safe place to support the reporting of alleged wrongdoing.

The Confidential Contact Person (CCP) will be available to serving and former members of the Defence Forces, both female and male, on a confidential basis. Their role is to listen and assist callers in documenting their allegations and provide guidance on follow-on options open to them. These options will differ depending on whether the individual involved is a serving or former member of the Defence Forces and on the nature of the allegations. This will allow each individual to make an informed decision in relation to next steps regarding their allegations. The CCP facility is currently up and running.

In addition, I have announced that my Department and the Defence Forces are engaging with the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre in terms of assistance for both serving and former personnel who have suffered sexual harassment, sexual assault, or rape, in the workplace.

RaiseaConcern will be providing me with an anonymised report on the nature and type of calls to the CCP and this will be an important aid in informing the upcoming Independent Review.

Defence Forces

122. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence when the independent review of the revelations made in a documentary (details supplied) will commence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51691/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): As the Deputy will be aware, I met recently with participants from the Women of Honour group and with a group of serving female members of the Defence Forces, where I had the opportunity to listen carefully to their experiences, in what were very informative meetings. In addition, participants from the Women of Honour group have met with the Secretary General and senior officials from my Department and I understand these were also productive meetings.

The Terms for an Independent Review to examine the effectiveness of the policies, systems and procedures currently in place for dealing with bullying, harassment, discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual assault in the Defence Forces, had been under consideration for several months and are being reviewed in light of these recent meetings and the views expressed.

I also intend to invite, very shortly, members of Women of Honour, serving members of the Defence Forces and other stakeholders, including the Representative Associations, to provide their input into the finalisation of these Terms.

I wish to underline again that this Review will be undertaken by external and entirely independent and unbiased experts in this field.

The Deputy will also be aware that I have recently announced interim measures for both former and serving members of the Defence Forces who have been affected by unacceptable behaviour in the workplace. Former members of the Defence Forces, both male and female, affected by any of the issues raised, are being advised to note details of these supports.

An agreement has been reached with RaiseaConcern, an organisation working with private sector and public bodies on issues relating to workplace wrongdoing, on the appointment of an external Confidential Contact Person (CCP) who will be available to assist both serving and former members of the Defence Forces who have been affected by these issues. This facility will provide a safe place to support the reporting of alleged wrongdoing.

In addition, I have announced that my Department and the Defence Forces are engaging with the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre in terms of assistance for both serving and former personnel who have suffered sexual harassment, sexual assault, or rape, in the workplace.

Finally, I wish to reiterate my commitment and that of the Secretary General and Chief of Staff, to ensure that every member of the Defence Forces, male and female can carry out their duties in a safe, and respectful workplace based on dignity, equality and zero-tolerance for any kind of unacceptable behaviour.

Bus Éireann

123. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Education if his attention has been drawn to fact that Bus Éireann will not allow drivers over 70 years of age to drive (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51645/21]

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.

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 are 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 are accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. This latter arrangement is in place for current school year pending completion of the full review of the School Transport Scheme.

It is Bus Éireann company policy that normal retirement age for all Bus Éireann staff is currently 66 years. However Bus Éireann part-time School Bus Drivers and drivers nominated by private operators who operate service as part of the School Transport Scheme may continue to perform in the role provided they hold the requisite licence and satisfy an annual medical examination until they retire at age 70.

This policy and criteria is applied to all drivers who provide school transport services on behalf of Bus Éireann equally.

Special Educational Needs

124. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Education when the 980 special education teacher positions announced in Budget 2022 will be filled; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51334/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Investment in special education is an ongoing priority for this Government.

Budget 2022 provides for the creation 980 new teaching posts in special education. This new investment is required to meet the needs of students with special educational needs enrolled in mainstream classes; students to be enrolled in new special classes and new special school places and the needs of new and developing schools.

The new allocation is broken down as follows:

- 620 of the new posts will provide additional support for children attending mainstream classes including new and expanding schools.

- 360 posts will facilitate the opening of 287 new special classes providing over 1,700 new places in 2022 and 140 new special school places

A new model for allocating special education teachers in respect of students with special needs enrolled in mainstream classes was introduced in 2017. 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. The profile of each school takes account of enrolments and a number of other factors that are considered to be indicative of the level of need in each school. There is a commitment to update profiles on a regular basis with the last update being for the 2019/20 school.

In addition, there is a provision for schools to seek additionality through the Exceptional Needs Review process if there is a significant change in their level of need in between profile updates.

The additional 620 SET posts will be allocated to schools based on updated SET school

profiles in 2022.

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.

Departmental Contracts

125. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education if she or any official from her Department has held meetings or conducted correspondence with a company (details supplied) from 1 January 2017 to date; if her Department has engaged the services of the company for any purposes from 1 January 2017 to date; if so, the nature of such services and the costs incurred; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51351/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Department has not held meetings or conducted correspondence with the company in question.

School Transport

126. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education when a special education transport grant will be paid to a person (details supplied). [51367/21]

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

Under the terms of my Department's School Transport Scheme for Children with Special Educational Needs, children are eligible for school transport where they have special educational needs arising from a diagnosed disability and are attending the nearest recognised school/class that is resourced to meet their special educational needs. Eligibility is determined following consultation with the National Council for Special Education through its network of Special Education Needs Organisers (SENO).

The pupil referred to by the Deputy is not eligible for transport under the Scheme for Children with Special Educational Needs as he is not attending the nearest recognised school/class that is resourced to meet his special educational needs.

The family is advised that if there is additional relevant information in relation to the child's application for transport that was not submitted with original application they should make it available to the SENO to establish if there are grounds for reviewing the application.

Education Policy

127. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education if satisfactory arrangements ensuring the continued education of a person (details supplied) have been put in place

notwithstanding the decision to expel which their parents intend to appeal; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51388/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): A student cannot be expelled from a school before the passing of 20 school days following the receipt of a notification under Section 24 of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000. The Educational Welfare Service have confirmed that they received the notification of intention to expel, in respect of the student (named by the Deputy) on 24th September 2021.

An official from my Department has been advised that a section 24 meeting has taken place, which was attended by the Educational Welfare Officer and the school Principal. The parent was invited to attend this meeting but was unable to do so.

I understand that at this meeting the school advised that they have made educational provision for this student during the interim period with school work regularly uploaded onto the school's online learning facility, Google classrooms. It was noted that the class teacher is always available to consult with and feedback to. School management maintained that an electronic device – a Chromebook laptop – was offered to the student to facilitate this online learning.

The EWO has indicated that he is happy to continue offering the parents advice and assistance around securing an alternative educational placement for their son.

School Staff

128. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Education if her Department will sanction the redeployment of a person (details supplied) to a post in another school given that their career break between 2015 and 2021 was not extended by the school in question which meant that they had to offer their resignation; if special circumstances can be taken into account when considering such a request; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51390/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The core function of the redeployment arrangements for teachers is to facilitate the redeployment of all surplus permanent/CID (Contract of Indefinite Duration) holding teachers to other schools that have vacancies. The redeployment of all surplus permanent/CID holding teachers is key to my Department's ability to manage within its payroll budget and ceiling on teacher numbers. Thereafter, the recruitment and appointment of teachers to fill teaching posts is a matter for the individual school authority, subject to procedures agreed under Section 24(3) of the Education Act 1998 (as amended by the Education (Amendment) Act 2012). The criteria used for the allocation of teachers to post-primary schools for the 2021/22 school year, including the redeployment arrangements, are available on my Department's website.

The Career Break Scheme for teachers is contained my Department's Circular Letter 0054/2019. In relation to the duration of Career Break, paragraph 3.1 and 3.2 states:

'3.1 A Career Break is for a period of not less than 1 school year and may be extended on an annual basis provided the total period of the Career Break does not exceed 5 years at any one time, subject to an overall maximum of 10 years absence in the course of the teacher's career.

3.2 A subsequent Career Break may not be taken until the teacher has served for a period equal to the duration of the previous Career Break. In the case of a teacher wishing to avail of a Career Break to undertake voluntary service abroad/missionary/diplomatic/military/Oireachtas or study leave this requirement will be waived.'

Special Educational Needs

129. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education the number of additional SNAs hired in the 2019-2020, 2020-2021 and to date in the 2021-2022 school year; the base figure at the end of the 2018-2019 school year; the number of additional SNAs being hired at present; the extra number that will be employed by September 2022; the number of the 1,165 extra SNAs announced in Budget 2022 that were due to demographic changes; the number that are real additional positions in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51412/21]

132. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education the number of special needs assistants by county in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51415/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 129 and 132 together.

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

The 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.

The following table outlines the total number of SNA posts allocated to schools since December 2018.

SNA allocations as at 31st December	Total
31/12/2018 (2018/19 school year)	14,973
31/12/2019 (2019/20 school year)	15,948
31/12/2020 (2020/21 school year)	17,014
31/12/2021 (2021/22 school year)	18,004
31/12/2022 (2022/23 school year) Planned	19,169

When a school has been allocated an SNA, the Board of Management, as the employer, is responsible for filling the vacancy and the decision on whether to employ a full time SNA to fill a full time post or to employ an equivalent number of part time SNAs rests with the employer. Information of the number of people employed to fill the posts allocated is not available.

Following Budget 2021, it is expected that a total of 18,004 Special Needs Assistant (SNA) posts will have been allocated to primary, post primary and special schools by the **end of December 2021** .

The NCSE advises that of the 990 post sanction in last year's budget, 919 have been allocated to date and the remaining 71 will be allocated before the 31st December 2021.

Budget 2022 announced details of €9.2 billion in funding for education and includes funding for an additional 1,165 additional special needs assistants to provide support to children with special educational needs, bringing the total number of SNAs to 19,169 by the end of December 2022. This represents an increase of 81% in the number of SNAs provided since 2011 at which point 10,575 SNAs were available.

The allocation of 1,165 SNAs announced in Budget 2022 is to meet the care needs of pupils

in **2022** and will enable the establishment of new special classes, creation of new places in special schools and support children in mainstream classes for the 2022/23 school year.

The allocation of the 1,165 SNA posts covers primary and post-primary schools as follows:

- 574 to support students in new special classes
- 46 to support students in new special school places
- 545 to support students in mainstream classes

The special education funding for 2022 is over a quarter of the current expenditure budget for the Department of Education.

The NCSE publish statistics on SNA allocations to primary, post primary and special schools in tabular form, by county and by school, for each school year, this information is available on their website, www.ncse.ie or by using the following link <http://ncse.ie/statistics>.

As this question relates to the statistics on the allocation of SNA support, I have referred the question to the NCSE for their direct reply.

School Enrolments

130. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education the number of primary and secondary school children by county in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51413/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Please find attached 2020-21 enrolments by county for Mainstream Primary Schools, Special Schools & Post-Primary Schools.

Please note all data is sourced from the final enrolment figures for 2020-21 which can be found here;

assets.gov.ie/129343/d973aee9-026b-40d4-b645-e3e8f07afebb.xlsx

assets.gov.ie/129346/de6f5f01-b86b-4503-b5a6-c8da4d78dfa7.xlsx

Mainstream Schools Enrolments by County 2020-21		Special Schools Enrolments by County 2020-21	
County	Pupils	County	Pupils
Carlow	7565	Carlow	186
Cavan	9877	Cavan	174
Clare	13170	Clare	175
Cork	62905	Cork	918
Donegal	18330	Donegal	171
Dublin	140879	Dublin	2793
Galway	30063	Galway	290
Kerry	15662	Kerry	248
Kildare	29498	Kildare	270
Kilkenny	11113	Kilkenny	232
Laois	11096	Laois	128
Leitrim	3718	Limerick	553

Mainstream Schools Enrolments by County 2020-21		Special Schools Enrolments by County 2020-21	
Limerick	22539	Longford	29
Longford	5335	Louth	352
Louth	17107	Mayo	130
Mayo	14366	Meath	236
Meath	26977	Offaly	37
Monaghan	7861	Roscommon	61
Offaly	9665	Sligo	107
Roscommon	7810	Tipperary	403
Sligo	7462	Waterford	246
Tipperary	18389	Westmeath	189
Waterford	14165	Wexford	247
Westmeath	11301	Wicklow	233
Wexford	18294	Grand Total	8408
Wicklow	17856		
Grand Total	553003		

School Staff

131. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Riordáin** asked the Minister for Education the number of primary and secondary school teachers by county in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51414/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The attached tables detail the total number of teaching posts allocated for primary schools (mainstream only) and post-primary schools during the 2020/2021 academic year.

Teaching posts in mainstream primary schools by county 2020-2021

County.Description	Total.posts.2020.2021
Carlow	488
Cavan	635.9
Clare	904
Cork	4323
Donegal	1271.9
Dublin	9398.5
Galway	2136.8
Kerry	1092
Kildare	1787
Kilkenny	671
Laois	745.5
Leitrim	245
Limerick	1589
Longford	389
Louth	1084.8
Mayo	1011.7

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County.Description	Total.posts.2020.2021
Meath	1584
Monaghan	510
Offaly	691
Roscommon	555.2
Sligo	482
Tipperary	1267
Waterford	905
Westmeath	744
Wexford	1194
Wicklow	1123.2

Teaching posts in post-primary schools by county 2020-2021

County	Total.posts.2020.2021
Carlow	478.55
Cavan	457.78
Clare	691.81
Cork	3595.96
Donegal	1145.13
Dublin	7284.8
Galway	1736.23
Kerry	949.02
Kildare	1525.5
Kilkenny	621.51
Laois	489.27
Leitrim	225.62
Limerick	1316.67
Longford	336.21
Louth	996.24
Mayo	871.24
Meath	1228.71
Monaghan	443.06
Offaly	538.47
Roscommon	341.55
Sligo	425.3
Tipperary	1118.25
Waterford	743.1
Westmeath	673.34
Wexford	1072.43
Wicklow	987.14

Question No. 132 answered with Question No. 129.

School Funding

133. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education the breakdown of the additional €18 million funding for DEIS in 2022; the number of extra primary and secondary schools that will be supported; the base cost of supporting an extra primary and secondary school, respectively; the specific additional costs for an average school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51416/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Budget 2022 has provided for an allocation of €18million for 2022 and €32million for 2023 to extend the DEIS programme to further schools with the highest levels of disadvantage. This represents an increase of over 20% in funding for the DEIS programme and will enable an expansion in 2022 of the programme to further schools.

This package follows an extensive body of work which has been undertaken by the DEIS technical group in relation to the development of a model to identify the concentrated levels of disadvantage of schools. The refined model is an objective, statistics based process, based on school enrolment data and data available from Census 2016 under the HP Deprivation Index.

This work involved an initial process of consultation by my Department with the education partners on the technical aspects of the model. Over the coming weeks there will be further consultation with relevant stakeholders to outline the components of the model. The purpose is to ensure that, as far as possible, the refined DEIS identification model can provide an objective and independent means of identifying schools serving high concentrations of pupils at risk of educational disadvantage and also to ensure there is a full understanding of the refined model and its potential application.

The costing of DEIS supports vary from school to school depending on enrolment and the profile of a given school. A definitive breakdown of the numbers of schools to be supported will not be available until the current phase of work is completed.

The full list of supports available to DEIS schools is available on my Department's website at the following link: www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/DEIS-Delivering-Equality-of-Opportunity-in-Schools-/DEIS-Supporting-Information/Supports-to-DEIS-Schools.html

School Staff

134. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the assistance that can be given to schools that are experiencing difficulty in obtaining substitute teachers; the plans in place to address this issue; if assistance can be given to a school (details supplied) that is experiencing a severe shortage of required substitute teachers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51468/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): A range of measures have been put in place to provide enhanced substitute cover in the context of Covid-19. These include a major expansion of the Primary Schools Substitute Teacher Supply Panels, which now employ almost 380 teachers and provide substitute cover to over 2,500 primary schools across the country. Further work is underway to ascertain if there are ways the operation of the panels can be enhanced to help with substitute teacher supply.

The Supply Panels work alongside the existing methods of sourcing substitute teachers, such as Sub Seeker the national substitution portal service for primary and post primary schools, operated by the Irish Primary Principals Network and developed in accordance with my Department's Teacher Supply Action Plan. Schools can also make local arrangements to have their own regular substitutes to call on if needed.

Measures are also underway to raise awareness of the availability of substitute work in schools. The Teaching Council has emailed over 111,000 teachers on its register, asking any who may be available for substitute work to register with Sub Seeker.

My Department has also adjusted its payroll operational arrangements so that the restriction on the number of days that teachers on career break may be employed as substitutes has been suspended and teachers who are job sharing are allowed to work additional hours.

As in 2020/21, flexible school placement arrangements are being implemented to enhance the availability of post-primary Professional Master of Education (PME) student teachers to fill short term substitute vacancies. My Department and the Teaching Council are also planning to meet with the providers of primary initial teacher education (ITE) in the coming days to explore how flexibility in primary ITE programme delivery could facilitate additional substitute supply.

In accordance with Circular 50/21, primary schools, including the school referred to by the Deputy, should have plans in place to access substitutes in the following sequence:

- Supply panel if the school is part of a supply panel cluster arrangement,
- School's own panel of regular substitutes,
- National substitute service,
- Administrative Principal if applicable
- Local arrangements that facilitate the pupils to be supervised in a manner that does not involve them being split between existing classes in classrooms

My Department is engaging on an ongoing basis with stakeholders to analyse the demand for substitution and to identify means to improve the availability of substitutes at this time.

Schools Building Projects

135. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education if the new Educate Together primary school in Baldoyle has gone to tender; if she will provide the details on the development going forward; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51517/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The school building project referred to by the Deputy is being delivered under my Department's Design and Build Programme.

On June 14th 2021, this project was included in a bundle of projects which were tendered to a newly established Design & Build Contractors Framework.

Once a Contractor has been appointed, my Department will keep the school informed of the construction programme underpinning the contract.

School Staff

136. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Education if she will respond to concerns raised in correspondence (details supplied) in relation to school services and the availability of substitute teachers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51570/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): A range of measures have been put in

place to provide enhanced substitute cover in the context of Covid-19. These include a major expansion of the Primary Schools Substitute Teacher Supply Panels, which now employ almost 380 teachers and provide substitute cover to over 2,500 primary schools across the country. Further work is underway to ascertain if there are ways the operation of the panels can be enhanced to help with substitute teacher supply.

The Supply Panels work alongside the existing methods of sourcing substitute teachers, such as the national substitution portal service Sub Seeker, operated by the Irish Primary Principals Network and developed in accordance with my Department's Teacher Supply Action Plan. Schools can also make local arrangements to have their own regular substitutes to call on if needed.

Measures are also underway to raise awareness of the availability of substitute work in primary schools. The Teaching Council has emailed over 111,000 teachers on its register, asking any who may be available for substitute work to register with Sub Seeker.

My Department has also adjusted its payroll operational arrangements so that the restriction on the number of days that teachers on career break may be employed as substitutes has been suspended and teachers who are job sharing are allowed to work additional hours

My Department and the Teaching Council are also planning to meet with the providers of primary initial teacher education (ITE) in the coming days to explore how flexibility in ITE programme delivery could facilitate additional substitute supply.

My Department is engaging on an ongoing basis with stakeholders to analyse the demand for substitution and to identify means to improve the availability of substitutes at this time.

The correspondence to which the Deputy refers concerns also the COVID Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS), which has been put in place to help 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 extra teaching hours which are being provided are additional to 13,600 special education teachers who support the additional learning needs of pupils in mainstream primary and post primary schools.

The allocations which are being made for schools under CLASS are additional allocations of teaching hours, for each school, which are provided on a graduated and proportionate 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 which are in the disadvantaged (DEIS) scheme.

Under the scheme, every school will receive an allocation of additional teaching hours, which they may use 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 must be used in the course of the 2021/22 school year. Guidance has also been provided for schools in relation to how the additional teaching hours should be best used as well as details of appropriate control and oversight measures required in schools.

With regard to the psychological services to our schools, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) model is one where there is a balance between consultation and casework about individual children, and support and development work with school personnel. The NEPS model does not operate on a waiting lists basis. This system allows psychologists to give early attention to urgent cases and also to help many more children indirectly than could be seen individually. It also ensures that children are not referred unnecessarily for psychological intervention.

Under the Special Education Teacher allocation model, a NEPS assessment is not required for students to access learning supports.

The capacity of NEPS was increased as part of a package of measures to support the reopening of schools when the provision of an additional seventeen psychologist posts to NEPS was announced, bringing overall sanctioned numbers to 221 whole time equivalent psychologist posts.

Special Educational Needs

137. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Education if she will address the concerns raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51575/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): The correspondence referred to raises many issues on education provision and the needs of schools and teachers in responding.

My Department aims to ensure that all children with special educational needs are provided with an education appropriate to their needs.

My Department's policy is that students with additional needs should be included where possible and appropriate in mainstream placements with additional supports provided. Where students require more specialised interventions, a continuum of education provision extends to include access to special school or special class places, where appropriate.

This continuum extends from fulltime placement in mainstream classes to full time enrolment in special schools with a number of options in between including access to a range of additional supports and for those children whose assessment of need includes a recommendation, access to special class provision. This is to ensure that wherever a child is enrolled, s/he will have access to an appropriate education.

My Department supports this continuum through a range of dedicated supports in line with the needs of the child. These supports include the provision of teachers, special needs assistants and psychological support from the National Psychological Service.

In addition, there are specialist supports provided by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). The Council has published Guidelines for Setting Up and Organising Special Classes for Primary and Post-Primary Schools. The guidelines advise that students enrolled in special classes should be included in mainstream classes, to the greatest extent possible, in line with their abilities. The Council provides extensive professional development programmes for teachers and advice for schools, parents and families.

Currently, my Department's budget for special education exceeds €2bn which funds the costs of over 14,000 special education teachers and over 19,000 SNAs which supports a broad

continuum of education for children with special needs.

ASD early intervention special classes are intended to provide early support for children with ASD before they start school. Following early intervention, children will attend a mainstream class unless there is professional guidance that they require a special class or a placement in a special school.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) published transitional guidelines for children with special needs. These wide-ranging and comprehensive guidelines provide advice and tips for parents, students and schools covering the transitions between all stages of education, these Guidelines are available at www.ncse.ie

In relation to the allocation of SNAs, the NCSE has responsibility for planning and coordinating school supports for children with special educational needs and for advising on the education provision for children nationwide, including the allocation of SNAs and reviews.

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. 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.

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

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes are subject to review and accreditation by the Teaching Council, for registration purposes as set out Section 38 of the Teaching Council Act.

The Teaching Council reviewed its policy on standards of ITE programmes and published an updated document *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education* in November 2020. As part of the review, the previous sixteen mandatory elements for all programmes of ITE have been updated and amalgamated into seven core elements, one of which is: Inclusive Education.

Inclusive Education has been strengthened in *Céim* and is described as ‘any aspect of teachers’ learning aimed at improving their capacity to address and respond to the diversity of learners’ needs.

All new Primary and Post-primary programmes submitted to the Council for accreditation must now be in alignment with *Céim*. Existing programmes of ITE shall be realigned in accordance with *Céim* for commencement in September 2022 for first year student teachers.

The NCSE provides a range of professional development programmes for teachers and advisory supports for schools in the area of supporting children with special educational needs. Information on these is available directly from the NCSE.

School Transport

138. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Education the status of plans to increase capacity on post-primary school buses in line with public transport given issues being experienced by working parents; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51578/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The School Transport Scheme is a sig-

nificant 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 are 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 are accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. This latter arrangement is in place for current school year pending completion of the full review of the School Transport Scheme.

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.

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

139. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to major difficulties being faced by primary school principals in sourcing substitute teachers; the way in which she plans to rectify same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51579/21]

149. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Education the steps her Department is taking to address the staffing crisis facing many primary schools in regard to substitute teachers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51725/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 139 and 149 together.

A range of measures have been put in place to provide enhanced substitute cover in the context of Covid-19. These include a major expansion of the Primary Schools Substitute Teacher Supply Panels, which now employ almost 380 teachers and provide substitute cover to over 2,500 primary schools across the country. Further work is underway to ascertain if there are ways the operation of the panels can be enhanced to help with substitute teacher supply.

The Supply Panels work alongside the existing methods of sourcing substitute teachers, such as the national substitution portal service *Sub Seeker*, operated by the Irish Primary Principals Network and developed in accordance with my Department's Teacher Supply Action Plan. Schools can also make local arrangements to have their own regular substitutes to call on if needed.

Measures are also underway to raise awareness of the availability of substitute work in primary schools. The Teaching Council has emailed over 111,000 teachers on its register, asking any who may be available for substitute work to register with *Sub Seeker* .

My Department has also adjusted its payroll operational arrangements so that the restriction on the number of days that teachers on career break may be employed as substitutes has been suspended and teachers who are job sharing are allowed to work additional hours

My Department and the Teaching Council are also planning to meet with the providers of primary initial teacher education (ITE) in the coming days to explore how flexibility in ITE programme delivery could facilitate additional substitute supply.

My Department is engaging on an ongoing basis with stakeholders to analyse the demand for substitution and to identify means to improve the availability of substitutes at this time.

School Curriculum

140. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Education if an update will be provided on the level of engagement with secondary school students with regard to consent, harassment and gender-based violence; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51595/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Access to sexual and health education is an important right for students. Schools have a responsibility to provide for this, in consultation with parents, having regard to the ethos of the school. 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 (or RSE) is required at all levels, from primary through to senior cycle. The Department has set out the content for each of these programmes in SPHE syllabuses and guidelines.

The current SPHE/RSE curriculum at both primary and post primary facilities teaching and learning about consent.

At primary level, the Stay Safe Programme has been introduced and is a mandatory part of the SPHE programme. The primary SPHE programme as a whole is also due to be updated by the NCCA as part of the work resulting from the NCCA's review of RSE provision in schools.

At post primary level, two programmes are in place which come under the heading of Personal Safety. One of these programmes is for junior cycle which addresses personal safety in relationships and explores topics such as healthy and unhealthy relationships, consent and domestic gender-based and sexual violence. The other programme, which is for senior cycle, addresses topics such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, dating violence and rape. Both of these programmes were designed by the Professional Development Support Service (PDST) and are intended to be taught as part of the wider SPHE/RSE curriculum. Professional development support is available to teachers, directly linked to these resources.

The Programme for Government states that 'this Government will develop inclusive and age appropriate curricula for Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) across primary and post-primary schools, including an inclusive programme on LGBTI+ relationships'.

In April 2018, the then Minister for Education and Skills asked the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to undertake a major review of RSE in schools across all stages of education to ensure that it is fit for purpose and meets the needs of young people today

in modern Ireland.

The Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post-primary schools was published by the NCCA on 11th of December, 2019.

The NCCA was asked to look at a number of specific issues in respect of RSE and the curriculum. These included but were not limited to consent; developments in relation to contraception; healthy positive, sexual expression and relationships; safe use of the Internet and social media and its effects on relationships and self-esteem; and LGBTQ+ matters.

The NCCA has established two development groups, one for primary and one for post-primary, to oversee the work in this area and support the development of guidance material for schools.

The immediate focus of the work of the NCCA is on creating support materials for teachers for publication online as part of an Interim Guidance Toolkit. The toolkit's purpose is to support effective teaching and learning of SPHE/RSE linked to the current curriculum and to provide guidance on how SPHE/RSE may be approached in a more holistic way. This work is progressing well and sections of the toolkit (a portal repository of teaching and learning resources linked to the Primary SPHE Curriculum, the SPHE JC Short Course and SC SPHE Framework) have now been published.

The NCCA online SPHE toolkits will be expanded during 2021-2022 to include age and stage appropriate guidance for teachers on how to address issues of consent, gender and sexual discrimination and violence, and related topics within the SPHE classroom.

In tandem with the development of the online Toolkit, preparation for redeveloping and updating the SPHE curriculum has begun. Updated curricula will be developed for Primary, Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle. It is expected that public consultation on the draft updated Junior Cycle SPHE specification will begin in early 2022.

In redeveloping the SPHE curriculum, the NCCA will be making explicit the importance of consent education and naming consent within the learning outcomes for RSE, across all levels, based on the principle that consent is a core dimension of all healthy interpersonal relationships.

In addition to developing updated curricula and support materials the NCCA will contribute to facilitating interagency collaboration and linkages between the formal and non-formal education sector to enhance the sharing of expertise, learning and resources related to RSE. The NCCA will also initiate networking between groups/agencies working to support schools on targeted initiatives, such as consent and LGBTQI+ issues.

School Admissions

141. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Education her engagements with the teaching unions and parents in relation to the shortage of school places in areas such as Dundalk, County Louth acknowledging the challenges this has on families at an already stressful time of year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51606/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department is aware of increasing pressures and demand for school places in a number of school planning areas including the school planning area to which the Deputy refers.

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 there are not available to all pupils
- External draw – pupils coming from outside the local area

The true extent of any capacity issue is the subject of my Department's ongoing engagement with the relevant school authorities. Similar to last year, my Department is engaging further with patron bodies, including patrons in the school planning area in question, to identify particular capacity requirements for the forthcoming year(s) which may necessitate action including, where required, the provision of modular accommodation solutions.

My Department's school building programme has a large pipeline of projects under its Large Scale Capital Programme and Additional Accommodation Scheme to cater for current and future educational demands. There are a number of such projects in Dundalk, including significant extension projects at St. Francis NS and St. Oliver Plunkett's NS. Good progress continues to be made with the rollout of projects and the current status of all projects is listed on a county by county basis on my Department's website at www.education.ie.

School Admissions

142. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Education the provisions that have been commenced in relation to the Education Act 2018, specifically, the aims to make the rules around admissions to schools more structured, fair and transparent; the provisions yet to be commenced; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51607/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 was signed into law on the 18th July 2018. The overall objective of the Act is to provide a new framework for school enrolment that is designed to ensure that every child is treated fairly and that the way in which schools decide on applications for admission is structured, fair and transparent.

The following provisions have been commenced and are now operational;

- Sec 62 requiring schools that are not oversubscribed to admit all students who have applied for a place.
- Amendment of the Equal Status Act 2000 which removed, in the case of recognised denominational primary schools, the previous provision that permitted such schools to use religion as a selection criterion in school admissions.
- Waiting lists are banned, thus ensuring that parents who move in to a new area are not disadvantaged.
- All schools must publish their admissions policies, including details of their selection criteria.

- All schools must publish an annual admissions notice, detailing the dates the applications process takes place, including details of offers made the previous year if the school was over-subscribed.

- Charging of fees or seeking payment or contributions for an application for admission to a school or for the enrolment or continued enrolment of a student in a school are prohibited.

- Section 8 setting out the steps requiring a school to open a special class or classes where the National Council for Special Education has identified a need for such provision within an area.

The remaining sections of the Act to be commenced require further consultation and procedures to be drafted and this process is ongoing.

School Admissions

143. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Education the number of schools that currently comply with the Education Act 2018 and the aims to make the rules around admissions to schools more structured, fair and transparent by county in tabular form; and the number of schools yet to comply with these rules. [51608/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): All recognised schools are required to comply fully with the act. The overall objective of the Act is to provide a framework for school enrolment that is designed to ensure that every child is treated fairly and that the way in which schools decide on applications for admission is structured, fair and transparent. The new arrangement also involve new appeal procedures for applicants where they were unsuccessful in gaining a place in a particular school.

My Department does not compile the information requested by the Deputy.

State Examinations

144. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Education if discussions are expected in the near future to give clarity as to the structure leaving certificate students will be encountering in 2022 (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51646/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I am conscious that student 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.

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.

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 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.

Education Policy

145. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Education her plans to provide further primary and post-primary schools in addition to increased provision within existing schools in an area given the increasing population (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51689/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): In order to plan for school provision and analyse the relevant demographic data, my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and uses a Geographical Information System, using data from a range of sources, including Child Benefit, school enrolment data and information on residential development activity, to identify where additional school accommodation is needed at primary and post-primary level. Santry and Northwood are located in Dublin 9 which is partly within each of the Whitehall_SantryD9, Beaumont_CoolockD5 and Drumcondra_Marino_D1 school planning areas.

The most recent projections for all three school planning areas indicate an increase in school requirements at post primary level. My Department is currently working to examine the capacity of the schools in the area to meet this projected demand.

Where data indicates that additional provision is required, 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.

A number of capital projects have been recently completed or are currently planned or underway in the Dublin 9 area, including expansions at St. Aidan's CBS, Dominican College, Clonturk College and Scoil Caitriona. Furthermore, a new post primary school was announced to be established to serve the Drumcondra_Marino_D1 school planning area and has yet to be established. The additional capacity being provided by all of these projects is being considered in the context of the projected future requirements in the area.

The most recent projections for the school planning areas do not indicate a requirement for the establishment of a primary school. My Department will continue to work to ensure that there is sufficient capacity to meet school place demand.

School place requirements nationally, including in Dublin 9, for both Primary and Post Primary level will continue to be kept under on-going review and in particular will have regard to the impact of the increased rollout of housing provision as outlined in Project Ireland 2040.

School Transport

146. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education the progress made in the review of the school transport service; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51692/21]

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.

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. The review encompasses the School Transport Scheme for Children with Special Educational Needs and the Primary and Post-Primary School Transport Schemes in terms of how each element of the schemes currently operate, to include eligibility criteria, trends, costs and cost drivers, and overall effectiveness in meeting the objectives of the schemes. The review will also examine the potential for integration of different strands of the scheme and a more co-ordinated approach with other Government Departments that also use transport services.

Following commencement of this review the Steering Group 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 in the current school year 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 are now taking place in the next phase of the review which is now underway. The Steering Group will continue to report to me on an interim basis as the review progresses, with a view to presenting a final report with recommendations on the future operation of the Department's School Transport Scheme.

School Transport

147. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education her plans for school transport to return to full capacity; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51693/21]

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.

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.

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.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

148. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education if her Department will review primary school class sizes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51694/21]

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.

At primary level, the annual staffing schedule determines the allocation of teachers to schools. The current allocation is on an average ratio of 1 classroom teacher for every 25 pupils. Budget 2022 has implemented a further 1 point reduction for the 2022/23 school year so that primary schools will be allocated teaching posts on an average basis of 1 classroom teacher for every 24 pupils in September 2022. Lower thresholds apply to DEIS Urban Band 1 schools.

This Budget measure has brought the teacher allocation ratio in all primary schools to the lowest ever seen at primary level. This is the second successive Budget which has seen an improvement in allocation of teachers to primary schools.

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. In the same period the staffing schedule improved from 28:1 to 25:1 for this school year.

Average class sizes improved from 24.9 to 23.3 in the same period. The most recent budget announcement will continue the positive trend of improving class sizes for this school year, and statistics on this will be published later in the year.

Question No. 149 answered with Question No. 139.

Social Welfare Eligibility

150. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will provide details of the entitlements of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51347/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Under current eligibility conditions, applicants must have a minimum of 520 full-rate paid contributions in order to qualify for standard State pension (contributory). This equates to 10 years of full-rate insurable employment over a person's working life. It should be noted that having a minimum of 520 full-rate contributions does not automatically entitle an applicant to the maximum rate of State pension (contributory). It is the qualifying threshold that must be satisfied so that an applicant's pension entitlement can be calculated, based on their individual circumstances.

For those who do not qualify for the State Pension (contributory), or qualify for a reduced rate of pension, the State pension (non-contributory) is an alternative means-tested, residency-based payment for persons of pension age. The applicant is assessed with half of the assessable means of the couple. The maximum rate payable equates to 95% of the maximum rate of State pension (contributory).

According to the records of my Department, the person concerned has not yet applied for either State pension. I have arranged for the necessary application forms to be sent to them. On receipt of an application, a decision can be made on their entitlement and the person concerned will be notified in writing of the outcome.

Alternatively, the person's spouse may consider applying for an Increase for a Qualified Adult (IQA) payment on their State pension (contributory) in respect of the person concerned. The relevant application form has also been issued.

The means test for the IQA is based on the qualified adult's personal means, solely or jointly held. Half of jointly-held means are assessable. The maximum rate of IQA for a qualified adult aged over 66 with nil assessable means equates to 90% of a full contributory pension.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Departmental Contracts

151. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she or any official from her Department has held meetings or conducted correspondence with a company (details supplied) from 1 January 2017 to date; if her Department has engaged the services of the company for any purposes from 1 January 2017 to date; if so, the nature of such services and the costs incurred; if a tender process was conducted; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51361/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Neither the Department of Social Protection or the Minister for the Department has held a meeting or conducted correspondence with this company since 1 January 2017 to date.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Driver Licences

152. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a person (details supplied) in County Kerry is eligible for a training support grant to secure a heavy goods vehicle licence; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51395/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): While participants of JobPath do not have access to the Training Support Grant (TSG) provided by the Department, the JobPath companies will on a case by case basis provide similar funding. JobPath providers have their own discretionary funds available to pay for training or other interventions; the decision to approve or reject any request for funding is solely at the discretion of the JobPath provider.

They will take into account the duration, cost and relevance to the customer's job goal preferences. The prevalence of employment opportunities in the sector will also be considered along with the likelihood that the customer secures full-time employment upon completion of the course.

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

I can confirm that the person concerned is currently engaged with the JobPath Service and has been since 14/07/2021. My officials have made contact with Turas Nua who state that the customer was advised of Turas Nua's policy regarding access to discretionary funding but that no request has been made to date.

The customer's Personal Advisor confirmed that he is due to complete the Category C Truck Driver Theory Test on 19/10/2021 but Turas Nua have not been notified of any offer of full-time employment made to the customer pending his receipt of a full Category C driver's licence. The notes on file

state that he hopes to commence the HGV Driving course in January 2022.

Family Support Services

153. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of a working family payment claim in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Cork. [51425/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Working Family Payment (formerly known as Family Income Supplement) is a weekly tax free payment which provides additional income support to employees, on low earnings, with children.

The person concerned reapplied for Working Family Payment through the Department's on-line application process.

WFP for the person concerned has now been awarded with effect from 14 October 2021.

The first payment issued to the nominated bank account on Thursday 14 October 2021.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Disability Services

154. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a person (details supplied) with a diagnosis of albinism who is in receipt of a disability allowance but does not have the stamps to qualify for invalidity pension, has an entitlement to apply for an invalidity pension on medical grounds. [51429/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Invalidity pension (IP) is a payment for people who are permanently incapable of work because of illness or incapacity and for no other reason and who satisfy the pay related social insurance (PRSI) contribution conditions.

There are a number of conditions that must be satisfied to qualify for IP, which include that a claimant must have at least 260 (5 years) paid PRSI contributions since entering social insurance and 48 contributions paid or credited in the last or second last complete contribution year before the relevant date of their claim. Only PRSI classes A, E, H & S contributions are reckonable for IP purposes.

The qualifying PRSI contribution is laid down in social welfare legislation and must be satisfied in order to be considered eligible for IP.

The most recent claim for IP was received from the person concerned on 29 September 2021. He was refused IP on the grounds that the contribution conditions for the scheme are not satisfied. Specifically, he does not have the required 260 contributions paid since entering social insurance. The Department's records indicate that he has a total of 99 contributions paid.

An applicant for IP must satisfy the contribution requirements for the scheme before any consideration can be given to their medical suitability for IP.

The person in question was notified of the decision to refuse IP on 04/10/2021, the reasons for it and his right of review and appeal. The person concerned was also afforded the opportunity to furnish full details of his employment record in Ireland and abroad if he feels his PRSI contribution record is incomplete.

I hope this clarifies the position.

Fuel Poverty

155. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of a fuel allowance application in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Cork. [51464/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Fuel allowance is a means-tested payment to provide assistance to householders on long-term social welfare payments towards the cost of their heating needs.

The main eligibility conditions that apply to the fuel allowance scheme are that a person must be in receipt of a qualifying payment, must satisfy a means test and must either be living alone or with other qualifying persons.

The person concerned applied for fuel allowance on 13 September 2021. Since it is a means-tested payment, information regarding their household means was requested on 18 September 2021. Following receipt of the requested information, fuel allowance has been awarded. Written notification of this decision issued to the person concerned on 11 October 2021. Fuel allowance payments from 1 October 2021, the start of the 2021/22 fuel season, have also issued to the person concerned.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Eligibility

156. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on an application for the 2021 carer's support grant by a person in (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51467/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I confirm that my department received an application for Carer's Support Grant (CSG) from the person concerned on the 29th September 2021.

Information was requested from the person concerned on 1st October 2021 and her reply was received on 11th October 2021.

I can confirm that the person concerned has been awarded a CSG for the years 2020 and 2021. Payment of €1,700 for the year 2020 and €1,850 for the year 2021 will be paid to the person's nominated bank account shortly. Notification of this decision has issued to the person concerned on 18 October, 2021.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Disability Services

157. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons that are in receipt of disablement benefit; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51519/21]

158. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons that have a level of disablement up to 50% and are in receipt of the corresponding weekly disablement benefit payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51520/21]

159. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons that are in receipt of disablement benefit but are not in receipt of incapacity supplement; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51521/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 157, 158 and 159 together.

Disablement benefit is one of the benefits payable under the occupational injuries benefit scheme, to an insured person who suffers a loss of physical or mental faculty as a result of an occupational accident or a prescribed occupational disease that was sustained on or after 1 May 1967. The person must have been in insurable (occupational injuries) employment at the time of the accident or when the disease was contracted.

The number of persons in receipt of Disablement Benefit is 14, 752

The number of persons that have a level of disablement up to and including 50% and are in receipt of a disablement benefit payment is 13,192.

People getting Disablement Pension (without another payment) can work, full or part-time. Incapacity Supplement is an extra supplement with Disablement Pension. Individuals may qualify for Incapacity Supplement if they are permanently incapable of work as a result of an

occupational accident or disease and do not qualify for another Social Welfare Benefit payment such as Illness Benefit, or Invalidity Pension. Individuals generally cannot qualify for Incapacity Supplement if they are in receipt of any other Social Welfare Benefit or Assistance.

The Number of persons in receipt of Disablement Benefit but not in receipt of Incapacity supplement is 13,979, the number of persons in receipt of Incapacity Supplement is 773.

An application form for Disablement benefit (OB21) can be downloaded from my Department's website or is available from local Intreo offices Nationwide.

Only on receipt of a fully completed application form can entitlement to disablement benefit be determined.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 158 answered with Question No. 157.

Question No. 159 answered with Question No. 157.

Pension Provisions

160. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of full rate pensions approved on an annual basis which have been based on level of contributions (details supplied) from 1991 to date, per contribution boundary in tabular form. [51529/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The figures requested by the Deputy are set out in the table below.

[Table]

The Deputy may wish to note the following:

- The requested information on pension awards prior to 2010 is not readily available.
- Automatic transfers from Invalidity Pension to State Pension at State Pension Age are categorised separately. This is because a person's social insurance record is not used to calculate the State Pension rate for people in this group.
- The contribution bands above represent the full social insurance record used in assessing the SPC claim. Note that this includes credited contributions and Home Caring Periods, if these were used in calculating the pension rate.
- Once a person qualifies for the maximum rate of State Pension, it is not necessary to add further information to the Department's systems in relation to pre-1979 history, credited contributions and Home Caring Periods. This means that some people's social insurance records may in fact have been stronger than shown above.
- In April 2012, the minimum level of paid contributions required to qualify for the State Pension increased from 5 years (260 contributions) to 10 years (520 contributions).
- Self-Employed social insurance contributions commenced in 1988. By 2013, those who were in full time self-employment since 1988 had accrued 1300 paid contributions. From 2014 on, such people move from the "1041 to 1300" band to the higher "other" band.

Social Welfare Schemes

161. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if recipients who are currently in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment will not be moved to standard job-seeker's terms should the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions not go ahead on 22 October 2021 as planned particularly with regard to those who cannot return to their employment as a result of current limitations on industries such as live entertainment and hospitality; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51534/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): To date, the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) has supported over 900,000 employees including the self-employed, who lost employment as a direct result of government mandated Covid-19 public health measures. The total expenditure on the scheme is now over €8.8 billion.

Due to the lifting of restrictions and success of the vaccine programme the number of recipients of the payment has now fallen dramatically, and is continuing to fall each week, from a peak of over 600,000 to a current figure of 93,400. I expect the numbers to continue to fall following the Government's agreement this week that the remaining aspects of the hospitality, entertainment and night-time economy sector can reopen subject to a range of protective measures being in place.

As set out by Government in the National Economic and Recovery Plan, the PUP is being gradually phased out over a number of months to align it with the standard jobseeker's payments.

As customers go on to the €203 rate, they will move to standard jobseeker terms. This is a necessary step to ensure equity of treatment and fairness within the social welfare system with those who lost their jobs pre-pandemic and indeed those who have lost their job since 8 July when the PUP scheme closed to new applicants.

In view of the approach being taken by Government, I have already deferred the process of moving from the lower €203 rate of PUP to a jobseeker's payment, which was due to begin in early September, until after 26th October. Accordingly, affected customers will continue to receive their PUP payment until 26 October when the process of their transition to a Jobseeker's payment will begin. My Department has already written to these customers to advise them of the transition process and the options available to them so that they will continue to be supported as appropriate.

Further rate changes will take place in November and in February 2022.

I trust that this clarifies the position at this time.

Fuel Poverty

162. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Social Protection if persons in receipt of the benefit for 65 year old payment will be eligible to apply for the fuel allowance payment; if the payment will be included as a qualifying payment for fuel allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51535/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Fuel Allowance is a payment of €33.00 per week for 28 weeks (a total of €924 each year) from October to April, to 365,000 low income households, at an estimated cost of €300 million in 2021. The purpose of this payment is to assist these households with their energy costs. The allowance represents a

contribution towards the energy costs of a household. It is not intended to meet those costs in full. Only one allowance is paid per household.

Qualifying payments for fuel allowance are those payments that are considered long-term payments and an applicant must also satisfy a means test. People on long-term payments are unlikely to have additional resources of their own and are more vulnerable to poverty, including energy poverty. It is for this reason that the Department allocates additional payments, supports and resources to help this cohort of claimants

The Benefit Payment for 65 Year Olds is a short-term payment for people aged 65 who have ceased employment or self-employment and who satisfy the pay-related social insurance (PRSI) contribution conditions. It is not a means tested payment. Accordingly, it is not a qualifying payment for receipt of fuel allowance.

Any decision to include the Benefit Payment for 65 Year Olds as a qualifying payment for Fuel Allowance would have to be considered in the overall policy and budgetary context.

Under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme, Exceptional Needs Payments may be made to help meet an essential, once-off cost which customers are unable to meet out of their own resources, and this may include exceptional heating costs. Decisions on such payments are made on a case-by-case basis.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Benefits

163. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Social Protection if persons in receipt of the benefit for 65 year old payment will receive the Christmas bonus; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51536/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Persons in receipt of the Benefit Payment for 65 Year Olds will receive the Christmas Bonus in 2021 as provided for in Budget 2022.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Eligibility

164. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a person (details supplied) in County Cork is entitled to the carer's allowance. [51538/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Carer's allowance (CA) is a means-tested social assistance payment made to a person who is habitually resident in the State and who is providing full-time care and attention to a child or an adult who has such a disability that as a result they require that level of care.

An application for CA was received from the person concerned on 23 September 2021.

It is a condition for receipt of a CA that the person being cared for must have such disability that they require full-time care and attention.

This is defined as requiring from another person, continual supervision and frequent assistance throughout the day in connection with normal bodily functions or continual supervision in

order to avoid danger to him or herself and likely to require that level of care for at least twelve months.

The evidence submitted in support of the application was examined and the deciding officer decided that this evidence did not indicate that the requirement for full-time care was satisfied.

The person concerned was notified on 15 October 2021 of this decision, the reason for it and of his right of review and appeal.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Benefits

165. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons availing of the telephone support allowance. [51576/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Telephone Support Allowance is an extra weekly payment for people in receipt of certain social welfare payments who also receive the Living Alone Allowance and the Fuel Allowance. At the end of September, some 136,400 people are receiving the allowance.

Social Welfare Benefits

166. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons availing of the living alone allowance. [51577/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Living Alone Allowance is an increase payable to recipients of certain social welfare payments if they are living alone. In September, 223,600 people were receiving this allowance.

Community Employment Schemes

167. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a community employment scheme placement can be extended for a person (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51582/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien): My Department provides a range of employment support schemes, including Community Employment (CE) which are specifically targeted at those people who have been unemployed for 12 months or more.

The aim of CE is to enhance the employability of disadvantaged and long-term unemployed people by providing valuable work experience and training opportunities in jobs based within local communities.

Together with Minister Humphreys, I recently announced further funding to allow for the extension of all contracts for existing CE and Tús participants until 4th February 2022, in recognition of the public health situation, which may have adversely affected some programmes. These final contract extensions will provide existing CE participants with additional time to complete training and benefit from ongoing work experience.

The person concerned commenced on the relevant CE scheme on 8 January 2018 and completed three years on CE on 31 December 2020. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the person concerned received an extension to November 2021, which has now been further extended to at least 4 February 2022. (It is intended to provide for phased exits from the extended schemes from this date onwards.)

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Pension Provisions

168. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of a pension for persons (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51642/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): State pension (non-contributory) is a means-tested payment for people aged 66 and over, habitually residing in the State, who do not qualify for a state pension contributory, or who only qualify for a reduced rate contributory pension based on their social insurance record. For the purposes of the means test; cash income, including foreign pensions, the value of any property (excluding a person's own home), and the value of any savings and investments which a person or their spouse, civil partner or cohabitant holds are assessable.

An application for state pension (non-contributory) was received from the person concerned on 30 August 2021. Following an assessment of the income and assets of the person concerned, including income from their spouse's employment, the Deciding Officer determined that the weekly means of the person concerned exceeded the permissible statutory weekly limit of €262.50, and their application was disallowed.

The person concerned was notified of this decision on 8 September 2021, together with the reasons for the decision and their right, if dissatisfied with the decision, to request a review of the decision, or to appeal the decision to the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office. There is no record that an appeal was received from the person concerned.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Income Inequality

169. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her attention has been drawn to the fact that there are persons that have no income of their own due to the fact that they are unable to work due to illness or disability or are stay at home parents (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51644/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department provides a number of income supports for those unable to work due to illness or disability. There is a range of benefits available to people who make Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI) contributions. Entitlement to such benefits is dependent on the individual's social insurance contribution record, the class of social insurance paid as well as satisfying other qualification criteria relevant to the scheme.

A person who has an insufficient PRSI contribution record to qualify for a social insurance benefit/pension may apply for the appropriate means-tested social assistance scheme. A means test establishes if a claimant has enough financial resources to support themselves and determines what amount of social assistance payment, if any, for which they qualify.

This system of social assistance supports provides payments based on an income need with the means test playing the critical role in determining whether or not an income need arises as a consequence of a particular contingency – be that illness, disability, unemployment or caring. The continued application of the means test not only ensures that the recipient has a verifiable income need but that resources are targeted to those with greatest need.

Cash/income that is assessed as part of the means test includes any income from employment or self-employment (and that of their spouse/partner, if applicable), income from a social security pension from another country and maintenance payments.

Capital assessed as part of the means test includes all monies held in financial institutions or otherwise, the market value of shares, as well as houses and premises owned by a claimant which may or may not be put to commercial use. Property personally used or the claimant's home is never assessed as part of the means test, regardless of who is the legal owner.

Disability Allowance (DA) is a weekly allowance paid to people with a specified disability who are aged over 16 and under 66. The disability must be expected to last for at least one year and the allowance is subject to a medical assessment, a means test and a habitual residency test.

The DA income disregard allows claimants to earn up to €140 per week from employment or self-employment without their payment being affected. Weekly earnings between €140 and €350 are assessed at 50% (that is 50% of earnings in this band are disregarded). 100% of earnings above €350 are assessed as means. An increase of €25 per week to the upper disregards was introduced in Budget 2022. This means that from June 2022 only earnings above €375 per week will be assessed at 100%. The income disregard aims to ensure that people with disabilities can participate in work while retaining a proportion of their social welfare payment.

The DA capital disregard allows for people to have capital to a certain level without their payment being affected. The table below sets out the formula used for determining weekly means from capital for DA.

Table: Weekly means formula for capital, Disability Allowance.

Formula	Weekly Means
First €50,000	Nil
Next €10,000	€1 per €1,000
Next €10,000	€2 per €1,000
Excess of €70,000	€4 per €1,000

Earlier this year, I introduced a new income disregard for Disability Allowance recipients who have been granted bursaries, stipends or scholarships towards completing a PhD. The disregard is subject to an annual limit of €20,000 per annum (i.e. if a recipient gets more than one bursary, the combination cannot exceed €20,000). This disregard is available for a maximum of four years. Budget 2022 saw the eligibility for this disregard expanded to recipients of the Blind Pension.

Social insurance payments for those unable to work due to illness or disability include Illness Benefit and Invalidity Pension. Illness Benefit is the primary income support payment for people who are unable to attend work due to illness of any type. Additional payments may also be made in respect of a qualified adult and qualifying children. Invalidity Pension is a pension paid to people who are 'permanently incapable of work' because of illness or disability.

The Department also provides the Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) scheme for those whose means are insufficient to meet their needs and those of their dependants. This

scheme includes Exceptional Needs Payments, Urgent Needs Payments and SWA Supplements (heat, travel and dietary supplements). These means tested payments may be made to help meet essential expenditure which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet from their weekly income. Details and eligibility criteria of the scheme are available at www.gov.ie/SWA

The Department regularly reviews its supports and payments schemes to ensure that they continue to meet their objectives - while any proposed changes have to be considered in an overall policy and budgetary context.

Social Welfare Rates

170. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she is satisfied with the €5 increase given to social welfare recipients; her views on whether it is acceptable given the increase in the prices of goods in all sectors and the impact it will have on these persons already under pressure financially; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51647/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I announced on Budget day that the Government will spend over €375 million in providing a €5 increase to the weekly rate of social welfare payments from January 2022. This includes a proportionate increase for qualified adults and those on reduced rates of payment. Young jobseekers on an age-related reduced rate will receive the full €5 increase in their rate.

In addition to a general rate increase, I have provided for targeted increases in payments. This will ensure that resources are focused, in the most effective way possible, to those with limited means, who are more at risk of poverty.

For example, social welfare recipients with children will see further increases of €2 per week in respect of each child aged under 12, and €3 per week in respect of children aged 12 or over.

Pensioners and people with disabilities who are living alone will see their weekly Living Alone Allowance increase by a further €3, while all Fuel Allowance recipients will see a €5 weekly increase during the fuel season.

As a result of these targeted measures, which will be introduced in addition to the €5 increase to core rates, a pensioner or person with a disability receiving fuel allowance, and who is living alone, will see an increase of €13 per week during the fuel season, while a lone parent with two children aged under 12 will see their weekly payment increase by €14 per week during the fuel season.

I am satisfied that the total social welfare budget package of €558.3 million has been designed to protect the most vulnerable in society. In addition to the general €5 increase in weekly payments, it targets measures for those most likely to be financially vulnerable so that it delivers a real increase in their weekly income in 2022.

Social Welfare Benefits

171. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons who applied for an exceptional needs payment to assist with funeral expenses in each of the years 2018 to 2020 and to date in 2021, by county in tabular form. [51696/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme, my Department may make an exceptional needs payment (ENP) to help meet essential, once-off expenditure which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet from their weekly income.

An ENP is a means tested payment payable at the discretion of the officers administering the scheme taking into account the requirements of the legislation and all the relevant circumstances of the case in order to ensure that the payments target those most in need of assistance.

An application can be made under the ENP scheme for assistance with funeral and burial expenses where there is an inability to pay these costs, in part or in full, by the family of the deceased person without causing hardship.

In addition, my Department may provide for the burial of a person who has died and in respect of whose burial suitable arrangements are not otherwise being made. In such cases, my Department may meet all expenses necessarily incurred in the burial of a person.

Statistics are maintained on the number of applications awarded under the SWA scheme. They are not maintained on the number of applications received or the outcome of those applications.

The tabular statement below shows the number of ENPs paid by county for funeral and burial expenses in each of the years 2018 to 2020 and to date in 2021

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Tabular Statement: Number of ENPs paid by county for funeral and burial expenses in the years 2018 to 2021 (end of September)

County	2018	2019	2020	2021
CARLOW	43	36	35	21
CAVAN	23	34	39	13
CLARE	39	43	43	34
CORK	245	211	234	191
DONEGAL	98	101	89	51
DUBLIN	1,156	1,131	1,050	676
GALWAY	75	97	78	44
KERRY	59	69	60	29
KILDARE	108	117	109	79
KILKENNY	59	51	38	41
LAOIS	44	55	71	29
LEITRIM	19	16	16	13
LIMERICK	116	125	91	72
LONGFORD	34	48	32	31
LOUTH	121	92	105	82
MAYO	57	46	63	29
MEATH	78	67	70	73
MONAGHAN	18	21	38	15
OFFALY	42	49	48	40
ROSCOMMON	32	36	37	30
SLIGO	35	33	35	28

County	2018	2019	2020	2021
TIPPERARY	95	121	106	58
WATERFORD	66	70	58	46
WESTMEATH	61	73	61	61
WEXFORD	60	62	41	32
WICKLOW	98	101	131	63
Total	2,881	2,905	2,778	1,881

Note: These figures are taken from the Department's ENP database and represent a snapshot of the ENPs as they are approved by an officer rather than when they are paid. Please note the figures do not capture payments that are cancelled, payments that go out of date or overpayments recouped.

Departmental Contracts

172. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he or any official from his Department has held meetings or conducted correspondence with a company (details supplied) from 1 January 2017 to date; if his Department has engaged the services of the company for any purposes from 1 January 2017 to date; if so, the nature of such services and the costs incurred; if a tender process was conducted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51349/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department cannot find any correspondence or reference to meetings held with Kinzen Limited, previously Neva Labs. The Department does not have a record of any contracts or spend with the company.

Child and Family Agency

173. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the amount of the €183 million funding for his Department announced in Budget 2022 that will be used to establish therapeutic services internal to Tusla; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51392/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): My Department has been allocated additional funding of €183 million in Budget 2022. This will bring the total investment provided to this Department to just over €2.1 billion for 2022. I was also pleased to announce in Budget 2022 that Tusla will be allocated €899m for 2022, which is an increase of €41m over the amount allocated in Budget 2021. The specific amount to be used for the purpose outlined by the Deputy is not yet established.

I will shortly issue my Performance Statement to Tusla outlining the overall parameters of Tusla's financial resources, and signalling my priorities for the coming year in accordance with section 44 of the Child and Family Agency Act 2013. In response to this, Tusla will prepare its annual Business Plan for 2022 in accordance with section 46 of the Act. This outlines the proposed activities for the year and the details of the proposed allocation of total financial resources.

Child and Family Agency

174. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the amount of the €183 million funding for his Department announced in Budget 2022 that will be used to establish a support service for parents of children that have been taken into care; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51393/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): My Department has been allocated additional funding of €183 million in Budget 2022. This will bring the total investment provided to this Department to just over €2.1 billion for 2022.

I was pleased to announce in Budget 2022 that Tusla will be allocated €899m for 2022, which is an increase of €41m over the amount allocated in Budget 2021. The specific amount to be used for the purpose outlined by the Deputy is not yet established.

I will shortly issue my Performance Statement to Tusla outlining the overall parameters of Tusla’s financial resources, and signalling my priorities for the coming year in accordance with section 44 of the Child and Family Agency Act 2013. In response to this, Tusla will prepare its annual Business Plan for 2022 in accordance with section 46 of the Act. This outlines the proposed activities for the year and the details of the proposed allocation of total financial resources.

I can advise the Deputy that requests for tenders for the development phase of a national service to support parents of children in the care of the state opened last week. Tusla has contracted the Children’s Rights Alliance (CRA) to undertake this process. The CRA is carrying out a scoping exercise on the needs of parents with children in care and is also managing the tender process to secure a service provider who will deliver and evaluate a model of supports to meet the identified needs. This is part of a process that, if proven effective, will move towards the development of a larger national service.

Childcare Services

175. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if the once-off measure costing €37 million will operate or be spent exclusively in 2022; if not, if it will roll over into 2023; and if so, the cost of the measure in 2023. [51396/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): In Budget 2022 I have secured an additional €78m in early learning and care and school age childcare funding, bringing the total investment in the sector to €716m next year.

Some €37m has been made available for Transition Fund for providers in the sector between the end of the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme and the introduction of the new Core Funding stream, May to August 2022. The Transition Fund will provide the necessary resources to support ELC and SAC services to ensure there continues to be no increases in parent’s fees for ELC and SAC in the period leading up to the introduction of the new funding stream.

It is my intention that this once-off measure will operate in 2022 to provide funding to support early learning and childcare services in the transitional phase to the introduction of the new funding stream in September 2022.

Freedom of Information

176. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will address a matter (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51641/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The interpretation and operation of the Freedom of Information Act 2014, and responses to individual requests, are the responsibility of each independent Government body. It is an operational matter for Tusla to deal directly with the persons concerned. I have asked Tusla to respond directly to the Deputy in relation to this matter.

If the individual is not satisfied with the decision of their Freedom of Information request, they may ask Tusla directly for an “internal review” of the decision. Should the individual still be dissatisfied with the result of the request, they can make contact with the Office of the Information Commissioner, details below, with regard to a further appeal.

The Office of the Information Commissioner

6 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 W773.

Phone: +353-1-639 5689

Email: info@oic.ie

Twitter: [@OICIreland](https://twitter.com/OICIreland)

Departmental Contracts

177. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he or any official from his Department has held meetings or conducted correspondence with a company (details supplied) from 1 January 2017 to date; if his Department has engaged the services of the company for any purposes from 1 January 2017 to date; if so, the nature of such services and the costs incurred; if a tender process was conducted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51356/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has not not held any meetings or conducted correspondence or engaged the services of Kinzen Limited, previously known as Neva Labs.

Further and Higher Education

178. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the timeline for the publication of the next national access plan; if there are plans to incorporate the introduction of a designated staff member for care leavers in higher education into the plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51394/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Work on the development of the next National Access Plan (NAP) 2022 - 2026 is currently underway.

The consultation process, which closed on 18th June 2021, invited all interested parties to make their views known on this matter and other matters related to access to higher education

particularly for groups who are underrepresented in the higher education population. One-to-one stakeholder meetings around the specific target groups to be supported for the period of the next NAP are currently underway. Colleagues in my Department are working closely with the HEA on the development of the new Plan with the intention of publishing the plan in the coming months.

Third Level Education

179. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of third-level students that applied for funding under the Student Assistance Fund in the past ten years in tabular form; the number that were granted funding; the number that were refused funding by educational institution; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51431/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The information requested by the Deputy is not readily available. We are working on compiling a response to the question raised and we will revert to the Deputy in due course.

Third Level Education

180. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of third-level students that are experiencing housing poverty; and if he has plans to survey third-level students to ascertain the pervasiveness of housing poverty among the student population. [51432/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The information requested by the Deputy is not held by my Department.

I understand that this is a very difficult time for students seeking to secure accommodation. The Government recognises this as a critical issue.

Approximately 40% of students who rent accommodation do so in purpose built student accommodation, with 60% in the wider private rental market. Accommodation shortages in the private rental market, which have been made worse by the effects of Covid, have impacted significantly on students this year.

As a country, we need to dramatically increase the supply of all types of housing and accommodation, including student accommodation.

My Department and I have been engaging with representatives from the higher education sector, including student representatives, on this issue. Together with these stakeholders and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, we are working to develop a stronger pipeline of affordable student accommodation.

Last week I announced an enhanced Student Assistance Fund of €17 million for the coming academic year. This Fund is a critical resource for students who are experiencing financial difficulties, whether they are ongoing or temporary in nature. It is available to students to support them in meeting a wide range of costs including rent, food, childcare and essential travel.

I expect to receive the final report of the independent Student Grant Review in the next few months. This will inform policy priorities and future considerations regarding the development

of student supports. I have secured significant resources in Budget 2022 to commence the process of making improvements in the Student Grant Scheme.

In addition to securing resources to cater for additional demand in SUSI, it is a priority for me that we begin to make changes to the Student Grant Scheme to help deal with the increased costs of attending college.

I also intend to continue to make progress in the implementation of the National Access Plan, which supports target groups who are otherwise under-represented in higher education, including through provision of bursaries.

Third Level Education

181. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the actions he is taking to ensure third-level educational institutions build and operate not-for-profit purpose-built student accommodation to alleviate the student housing crisis. [51433/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I understand that this is a very difficult time for students seeking to secure accommodation. The Government recognises this as a critical issue.

Fundamentally the challenge is one of supply and as a country, we need to increase the supply of all types of housing and accommodation, including student accommodation.

That is why the Government has launched Housing for All, led by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. This sets out a series of actions which will be delivered to fix the housing crisis. The plan is backed by the largest ever housing budget in the history of the State to transform our housing system, in excess of €20bn.

We have also been taking steps under the National Student Accommodation Strategy, published in 2017, to support increased supply. Eight key targets and 27 actions are outlined in the strategy. The target for new purpose built student accommodation beds was for the provision of 7,000 bed spaces by end 2019 and a total of 21,000 additional purpose built student accommodation beds by 2024.

The 2019 target was exceeded, with 8,300 bed spaces completed by the end of 2019.

As of Q2 2021, 10,700 bed spaces have been completed, work is underway on site on an additional 3,500, with planning permission granted on a further 11,300.

Actions under the strategy have also included ensuring that higher education institutions have access to low-cost financing. Since 2017, the Housing Finance Agency has approved a total of €157 million in loans, to support the provision of more than 1,400 new student bed spaces across three universities.

During the Summer, together with Minister Donohoe and Minister O'Brien, I 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 also contains a commitment to support technological universities to develop purpose-built student accommodation, 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. I will be working to progress this with colleagues across Govern-

ment.

My Department has been engaging with the higher education sector, together with the Department of Housing, to work through the range of issues identified by institutions to seek to develop a stronger pipeline of student accommodation.

Further and Higher Education

182. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science further to Parliamentary Question No. 1302 of 27 July 2021, if he will provide details on the work plan of the NTF Advisory Group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51465/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): In late 2020, the NTF Advisory Group agreed a 24 month work plan to examine a range of themes that will ultimately guide upskilling and reskilling priorities for the NTF into the future. During its quarterly meetings over the period, the Group intends to consider a range of issues, including:

- Automation and future world of work
- Funding strategy
- NTF Metrics and evaluation
- Digital and Technology Skills
- SME support
- Low carbon and Green economy
- Regional Skills Development
- Labour market focus

Further and Higher Education

183. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will provide a breakdown of the expenditure heading Training People for Employment of the National Training Fund for 2021; the full range of course covered; the number of places provided; the average cost per place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51466/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): The information requested is being compiled and will be forwarded to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Third Level Education

184. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if an update will be provided with regard to engagement with third and higher-level students in relation to consent, harassment and gender-based violence; and if he

will make a statement on the matter. [51596/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Our higher education institutions have a responsibility to their students and staff to foster a campus culture that is clear in the condemnation of unwanted and unacceptable behaviours, which act as barriers to their safety and their active participation in college life. Over €400,000 has been provided to our Higher Education Institutions to fund a number of initiatives. In addition, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) has allocated over €500,000 towards such areas as consent workshops, the development of the anonymous report and support tool, and the UCC Bystander intervention programme.

As the Deputy is aware, I wrote to the Presidents of the publicly funded higher education institutions, in August 2020 with the objective of strengthen institutional action in this area. Institutions were requested to produce individual action plans on tackling sexual violence and harassment. These action plans were completed earlier this year, and institutions must report annually on their progress in implementing the Framework.

Surveys into staff and student experiences of sexual violence and sexual harassment in our higher education institutions were launched in April 2021. The surveys, which were conducted by the HEA, were sent to all students and staff by their higher education institution, and a report on the surveys will be submitted to the Department shortly.

In addition, Speak Out, an Online Anonymous Reporting Tool for Sexual Harassment and Violence across higher education institutions has been launched this week. This project is led by the Psychological Counsellors in Higher Education in Ireland, with the support of the HEA. Embedding the Framework for Consent into the policies and procedures of HEIs, ensuring their long-lasting impact, is a priority for the Department, as is the ending of sexual violence and harassment. Third level can be a leader in this area and I am determined to ensure there is a zero tolerance approach.

Research Funding

185. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of successful Irish applicants for ERC grant funding for each of the years 2012 to 2021, in tabular form; and the nature of those awards. [51640/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The attached table details the European Research Council (ERC) grant funding information for successful Irish applicants for the years 2012-2020. ERC awards are made under the European Commission's Research & Innovation Framework Programmes.

In total, 127 projects were awarded ERC grant funding from 2012-2020. A total of €196 million was awarded in this time period.

2021 is the commencement year of the Horizon Europe Framework Programme and as such results and related data are not yet available. The ERC Database (erc.europa.eu/projects-figures/project-database) provides significant information on each Irish ERC Project.

The ERC complements other funding activities such as those of our national research funding agencies, and is a flagship component of Horizon Europe - the current framework programme.

The Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation are vital instruments for Ireland's

international research and innovation collaboration. In Horizon 2020, Ireland has so far won €1.18 billion in funding, and Irish researchers and innovators have particularly excelled in Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions and the European Research Council.

Horizon Europe is the ninth iteration of the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation. It was officially launched on 2 February 2021. Running from 2021-2027, Horizon Europe is the most ambitious Research and Innovation programme in the world with a budget of €95.5 billion. Building on the achievements of Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe offers a broad range of opportunities for Irish researchers, innovators and Irish companies of all sizes in the pursuit of new discoveries, scientific and technological advancement and innovation.

[ERC]

Prison Service

186. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Justice when the review of Covid-19 prison visits will be published; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51572/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): As the Deputy will be aware, the Office of the Inspector of Prisons is a statutory body, independent in its work, set up under the Prisons Act 2007. The Inspector's key role is to carry out regular inspections of prisons. The Office is required to inspect the twelve prisons in Ireland to examine the treatment and conditions of prisoners and staff.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the need to monitor the situation within prisons for prisoners and staff, the Inspector has suspended her 2021 general inspection programme and has instead embarked on a COVID-19 focused inspection schedule, designed to provide a human rights-based assessment of the response of the Irish Prison Service to the pandemic.

As the Deputy may be aware, on 3 August this year, I published the first 4 COVID - 19 Thematic Inspection reports received from the Inspector of Prisons in relation to Mountjoy, Cloverhill, Wheatfield and Limerick Prisons.

I have also received Covid -19 Thematic Reports relating to Shelton Abbey, Portlaoise, Cork and Arbour Hill prisons. The intention is to bring all four reports to Government in the coming weeks and to publish them shortly thereafter.

An Garda Síochána

187. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Justice further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 704 and 705 of 29 September 2021, if she will provide an update on the Garda numbers by division (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51339/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The resources provided by government to An Garda Síochána have reached unprecedented levels, with an allocation of €1.952 billion in 2021 and over €2 billion in 2022. This has enabled sustained, ongoing recruitment.

As the Deputy will appreciate, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the general management and administration of the Garda organisation under the Garda Síochána Act 2005. This includes the deployment of members of An Garda Síochána throughout the State. As Minister, I have no role in these independent functions.

However to be of assistance, I can inform the Deputy that as of 30 September 2021 there are currently 257 members assigned to Ballymun District. This is a 17.8% increase compared to December 2016, when there were 218 members attached to this District.

As of the same date there are 343 members of An Garda Síochána attached to Blanchardstown District. This is a 10.6% increase compared to December 2016, when there were 310 members attached to this District.

This information is based on information provided to me by the Garda authorities and which is available on my Department's website at the following link: http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Workforce.

Departmental Contracts

188. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Justice if she or any official from her Department has held meetings or conducted correspondence with a company (details supplied) from 1 January 2017 to date; if her Department has engaged the services of the company for any purposes from 1 January 2017 to date; if so, the nature of such services and the costs incurred; if a tender process was conducted; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51358/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department has had no meetings or correspondence with the company in question since 1 January 2017 to date, nor has it engaged the services of the company.

Prison Service

189. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice if she will address a series of matters in relation to a prisoner (details supplied) who absconded from Loughlan House Prison, Cavan, on 4 October 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51368/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I hope you can appreciate that it would not be appropriate for me to comment on individual prisoner cases.

However, I can assure the Deputy that the return of the prisoner in question to custody is now being actively pursued by the Gardaí and I can advise that the Irish Prison Service has commenced an internal review of the circumstances of his absconding with a view to identifying any improvements to processes and procedures arising from same.

In relation to the how decisions are made about the transfer of a prisoner from a closed to an open prison, the Deputy may find it helpful for me to set out some general information on this.

Prisoners can be transferred to open prisons for sentence management purposes and are considered for transfer to an Open Prison under the Irish Prison Service Open Centre Policy. Approval is granted subject to them meeting certain criteria. The decision to transfer a prisoner is taken after a review of their sentence in order to determine if they are progressing well and engaging in structured activities, for example if they have completed education or training courses. Such recommendations are made by a Multi-Disciplinary Team at a Sentence Management Review Meeting.

In cases where a victim is registered with the Victim Liaison Office in the IPS, they will be notified of any planned transfer of the prisoner to an open prison.

An Garda Síochána

190. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice if she will address a series of matters in relation to a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51369/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I can assure the Deputy that I fully appreciate that this has been a difficult and long wait for the family of Patrick Nugent. I also appreciate their desire to understand the circumstances which led to his death. The Deputy will be aware that an inquiry under section 42 of the Garda Síochána Act 2005 was conducted by former Judge Patrick Clyne into the Garda Síochána investigation relating to the death of Mr Nugent in 1984.

The Judge completed his inquiry on 31 October 2020 and my Department received his report on 3 November 2020. The advice of the Attorney General was sought on the matter of publication.

On 8 October 2021 my officials met with the family to discuss the implications of that legal advice. On 14 October 2021, the solicitor for the family was provided with a redacted copy of the report on the basis of the advice of the Attorney General.

Prison Service

191. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice the cost breakdown for each support service currently available to inmates within the Irish Prison Service. [51370/21]

192. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice the number of inmates within the Irish Prison Service who have engaged with support services between 2016 and 2020, in tabular form.; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51371/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 191 and 192 together.

I can advise the Deputy that the Irish Prison Service provides a wide range of rehabilitative supports and services to prisoners. These include education, employment, work training, healthcare, psychiatric, psychological, counselling, welfare and chaplaincy services, some of which are intended to provide purposeful activity while in custody and to encourage and equip individuals to lead law-abiding lives on release.

Prisoner services are provided through a blend of different methods of service delivery with some services, such as Psychology, Work and Training; Chaplaincy and Healthcare provided by staff directly employed by the Prison Service. Other services such as Probation Service, Education and Mental Health Services are provided by staff from other statutory organisations.

Services such as drug addiction and resettlement services are provided to the Prison Service by organisations contracted for that purpose.

These services are available to all prisoners in all locations. Due to the varied nature of service delivery the Irish Prison Service does not record centralised data on prisoner who have engaged with one or all of these service providers.

To provide data on the number of inmates who have engaged with these support services between 2016 and 2020, would require a manual examination of a large number of individual

prisoner records. Such an examination would require a disproportionate and inordinate amount of staff time and effort, which could not be justified where there are other significant demands on resources.

However I am advised that the Prison Service are currently reviewing all of the information they gather in order to improve data analysis and reporting. This restructuring of data will facilitate more timely and accurate provision of structured data and information requests going forward.

The costs associated with the provision of prisoner services are published annually in the annual Appropriate Accounts. The costs for the provision of Prisoner Services and Education Services is set out in the table below. The Prison Services category includes expenditure for Medical Care and for Work Training but also includes expenditure for - Prisoner Catering Service; Prisoner Clothing and Toiletries; Prisoner Bedding, Furniture & TV's; Cleaning & Laundry Services and Gratuities.

Table 1

Total expenditure Prisoner Services and Educational Services for the period 2016 to 2020.

Source: Vote21 IPS	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Appropriation Accounts	€'000	€'000	€'000	€'000	€'000
A.4. Prisoner Services	27,649	27,913	29,973	28,595	34,203
A.6. Educational Services	1,065	1,083	1,227	1,389	1,424

Question No. 192 answered with Question No. 191.

Domestic Violence

193. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice the funding provided to domestic violence support services in each of the years 2016 to 2020, in tabular form. [51373/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The information requested by the Deputy is currently being compiled and I will write to him directly when it is available.

Cybersecurity Policy

194. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice if funding has been provided for the establishment of regional cybercrime hubs. [51374/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I can assure the Deputy that the prevention and investigation of cybercrime is a priority for the Government and for An Garda Síochána. Budget 2022 provides over €2 billion in funding to An Garda Síochána. Since 2016

the budget for An Garda Síochána has increased by approximately €500m, or 33%. These funds are providing for continued investment in the Garda National Cyber Crime Bureau, with ongoing expansion of the Bureau between this year and next, including the recruitment of 20 civilian expert posts at engineer grade.

As the Deputy will be aware, the allocation of funding for specific Garda projects is a matter for the Garda Commissioner, who under the Garda Síochána Act 2005, is responsible for the management and administration of the Garda organisation.

I understand that the roll out of the regional cybercrime units is ongoing and to date funding has been provided for four Regional Cybercrime Hubs established in Wexford, Mullingar, Cork and Galway.

I am informed by the Garda Authorities that the expansion of the Garda National Cyber Crime Bureau (GNCCB) is a priority project under the A Policing Service for our Future programme. The aim of this project is to significantly enhance the capacity and capabilities of GNCCB to tackle cybercrime in this jurisdiction, including the establishment of six GNCCB Cyber Satellite hubs strategically located throughout the country. To date, funding has been provided which has led to the commencement of operations at four GNCCB Cyber Satellite Hubs. Planning is currently underway for the establishment of two additional GNCCB Cyber Satellite hubs.

Courts Service

195. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice when she will publish her Department's implementation plan to reform the civil justice system following recommendations of the civil justice report. [51375/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Report of the Review of the Administration of Civil Justice, chaired by the former President of the High Court, Mr Justice Peter Kelly, contains 95 specific recommendations to make the civil justice system more efficient and easier for people to access.

These recommendations include: measures to reduce the costs and time involved in legal proceedings; amendments to primary and secondary legislation; changes to court practice; improved physical infrastructure and Information Management and Technology facilities; and new administrative arrangements.

Implementation will require a phased, co-ordinated approach and an implementation group, comprising representatives of the main statutory organisations with a role in implementing the recommendations, has been established to monitor and support their progress.

Given the breadth and complexity of the recommendations, an Implementation Plan has been developed which identifies seven work streams aligned to the main themes from the Kelly Review, and sets out the timelines for implementation over the next three years. I expect to publish the Plan very soon.

An Garda Síochána

196. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice the exact structure and funding provided to the new community safety partnerships; and the way in which funding is allocated to this project from the Community Safety Innovation Fund. [51376/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy may be aware, three

Local Community Safety Partnerships are currently being piloted over 24 months in North Inner City Dublin, Waterford and Longford. These locations allow the proposed structure to be trialled in a high population density area, a medium population density area and a low population density area, with a regional distribution. The pilots are subject to independent evaluation, with learning outcomes taken into account in the drafting of the statutory framework for community safety and applied to the national roll out of similar partnerships in communities across the country.

Membership of these Local Community Safety Partnerships includes representatives from relevant public services including the HSE, Tusla, An Garda Síochána, local authorities and councillors as well as residents and community groups, representatives of youth, new communities and the voluntary, business and education sectors.

The pilots are each chaired by an independent chairperson and each pilot is also supported by a dedicated staff member - the local community safety coordinator - whose role is to support the Partnership, engage the residents in the community on safety issues and link them in with the work of the Partnership.

Each of the pilots will receive funding for the provision of administrative support to undertake the work of the pilots. The Dublin pilot will receive funding of €345,000 over 24 months in partnership between my Department, NEIC and Dublin City Council. The Waterford and Longford Pilots will receive funding through Dormant Accounts Funding of €245,000 each for 24 months.

Each Local Community Safety Partnership will develop a Local Community Safety Plan which will identify actions and the Department or Agency with responsibility for fulfilling these actions. Support to implement these actions will come from existing budget allocations.

Local Community Safety Partnerships may also apply for funding for additional community safety interventions through the new Community Safety Innovation Fund, the establishment of which is provided for in Budget 2022. It is intended that this fund will support investment in projects which will improve community safety. The fund, which is expected to grow in the coming years, will have an initial outlay in 2022 of €2m.

A call for funding proposals will issue seeking applications for community safety projects and similar initiatives from bodies involved in community safety, such as the new Local Community Safety Partnerships and the Drogheda Implementation Board, as well as similar entities nationwide.

Applications will be assessed against stated criteria outlined in the call for proposals to ensure funding is allocated to encourage the development of innovative ways in which to improve community safety from those people who understand local community safety needs best. These criteria for allocating funding are currently under consideration and will be announced in due course.

The approach we are taking will ensure that the best proposals to improve community safety will get the funding they need and will encourage the development of innovative ways in which to improve community safety from those people who understand local community safety needs best. It will also allow best practice on community safety to be shared with other partnerships around the country as new proposals get developed.

An Garda Síochána

197. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice if a breakdown will be provided by category of 999 calls cancelled per year since 2018, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51378/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy will be aware, I consider any inappropriate cancellation of 999 calls a very serious matter. This falls significantly below the high standards that the public expect from the Gardaí and the high standards that An Garda Síochána set for themselves. I am particularly concerned that anyone experiencing domestic abuse, or indeed anyone in a vulnerable position, who summoned the courage to seek assistance may not have received it.

The Policing Authority was asked by Minister McEntee to oversee the review being carried by An Garda Síochána in relation to this matter, and there have been a number of engagements between the Authority and An Garda Síochána since March of this year.

I share the Authority and the Commissioner's concern about the continuation of what appear to be inappropriate cancellation and classification of calls since the introduction of the new procedures. These circumstances will of course be considered by the Authority as part of their continuing oversight of the Garda review of this matter, and will be taken into account in the work being carried out by an external policing expert who has been appointed to assist the Authority in this task. I await the outcome of the Authority's work in this regard and will of course make available any relevant statistics which emerge from this process.

Naturalisation Applications

198. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of eligibility for naturalisation in the case of a person (details supplied); when it is expected to finalise the application; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51523/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): This application for a certificate of naturalisation continues to be processed with a view to establishing whether the applicant meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision in due course.

The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements not only within the State but also at European Union level and it is important that appropriate procedures are in place to preserve the integrity of the process.

It is recognised that all applicants for citizenship would wish to have a decision on their application without delay. However, the nature of the naturalisation process is such that, for a broad range of reasons, some cases will take longer than others to process. In some instances, completing the necessary checks can take a considerable period of time.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility at: INISOireachtasMail@justice.ie, which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Question process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in the cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Immigration Status

199. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the current and expected residency status in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51528/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): The person referred to by the Deputy holds a Stamp 1G Graduate permission, which has been extended until 15 January 2022, under the final automatic extension of immigration permissions I announced on 15 September 2021.

A Stamp 1G indicates that a person has permission to look for employment in the State under the Third Level Graduate Programme. The Stamp 1G is granted for 12 months to ensure that such students are making genuine efforts to access suitable graduate level employment, for example attending job interviews or signing up with graduate employment agencies. However, due to the impact of Covid-19, I recognise that some people may not have been able to find graduate level employment before their Stamp 1G permission is due to expire. Therefore, to assist such people, my Department is considering any applications for an extension of Stamp 1G immigration permission on a case by case basis.

Applicants may apply by attending at their local Immigration Office, or if residing in the Dublin area, they can apply online via inisonline.jahs.ie/user/login.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility at INISOireachtasMail@justice.ie, which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Question process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in the cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Departmental Data

200. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Justice the number of visa applications, citizenship applications and domestic residence permission applications that have been processed to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51546/21]

201. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Justice the number of citizenship applications and visa applications that were submitted in 2020; the number processed to date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51547/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): I propose to take Questions Nos. 200 and 201 together.

My Department continued to accept and process immigration and citizenship applications throughout the pandemic. As the Deputy will appreciate, the figures for 2020 and to date in 2021, reflect the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the demand for and processing of applications.

The processing timeline for standard applications has unfortunately increased due to the disruption to normal business as all staff were adhering to the necessary health and safety related restrictions imposed as a result of the Covid-19.

The tables below set out the information requested by the Deputy.

Application Type	Applications processed in 2021
Visa	30971 (including 829 withdrawals)
Citizenship	6,987
Domestic Residence	5,577

Application Type	Applications received in 2020	Applications processed in 2020
Visa	43,871	48,661 (including 4,000 withdrawals)
Citizenship	10,354	5,481 (919 of which were received in 2020)

It should be noted that applications processed in a calendar year will include applications received in a previous year.

Question No. 201 answered with Question No. 200.

Courts Service

202. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Justice the resourcing available for the court liaison service; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51573/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I want to assure the Deputy that I am very conscious of how harmful the consequences of crime can be for victims and ensuring victims are better supported by the criminal justice system is a priority for me.

Through the implementation of ‘Supporting a Victim’s Journey’, I am reforming our criminal justice system to ensure that victims are supported, informed and treated with respect and dignity by the criminal justice system and by everyone they come into contact with as part of their journey through it.

There are a number of different victim supports services throughout the criminal justice system to ensure that this is the case.

The funding provided by my Department to promote and assist the development of specific support services to victims of crime, includes supports related to court accompaniment.

In this context, my department funds Victim Support at Court (V-SAC) which is one of the key NGOs that specifically provides court accompaniment services, and from 2021 has committed to a three-year funding arrangement which will help to ensure that their services can continue on a sustainable footing. My Department is providing €148,041 in funding to Victim Support at Court (V-SAC) in 2021.

A total of €4.9m is being allocated to Victims of Crime under Budget 2022. This increase in funding will ensure that court accompaniment related supports funded by my Department are available to all categories of victims of crime throughout the State.

My Department is also reviewing the supports and funding of civil society organisations providing frontline services to identify where gaps exist and how to bridge them. This piece of work will be completed shortly.

The Deputy will also be interested to know that An Garda Síochána currently has 28 Victim Service Offices, one in each operational Garda Division. These offices ensure victims of crime are kept informed about the progress of their case and the supports available to them.

Staff of these offices are the central point of contact for victims and are responsible for communicating with victims and prioritising their needs.

They supplement victim support activity already being undertaken by investigating Gardaí in the local Victim Service Office.

The Garda Victim Liaison Office is part of the Garda National Protective Services Bureau. It is responsible for developing and reviewing Garda policies on victim related issues and for supporting the implementation of An Garda Síochána's Victims Charter.

The Office also engages with government funded victim support organisations, as well as with criminal justice and other state agencies, on ways to improve services to victims of crime. It also provides support to the Family Liaison Officers who are appointed to help and support victims of crime and their families in serious cases.

The Irish Prison Service also provide a victim liaison service. A victim of crime, a member of their family, or a third party person acting on their behalf can register with the Victim Liaison Office in the IPS in order to be kept informed of significant developments in the sentence management of a prisoner.

Victims registered with the Service are provided with information on when the offender will be released from prison and about any form of temporary release. They are also informed about inter-prison transfers, hospital appointments and court appearances. Victims are also provided with information regarding an escape from custody, as well as being notified about an upcoming Parole Hearing and the outcome of it.

The Victim Liaison Officer can also provide victims with general information about the prison system, such as the regime in different prisons, remission on sentences and the operation of the Parole Board. The Officer deals with victims on a strictly confidential basis.

It is important to emphasise that the Victim Liaison Service is a voluntary service. It is a matter for the victim or their families to choose if they want to receive information about a prisoner. They can register with the service at any stage during the prisoner's sentence and can also change their mind and "opt-out" of the service at any time.

Domestic Violence

203. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Justice if an update will be provided on efforts to tackle domestic violence in Ireland; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51593/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I would like to thank the Deputy for raising this issue and to assure him that tackling domestic violence in Ireland is a key priority for this Government.

This is reflected in the Programme for Government where we committed to a number of actions in this area, such as the development of a third national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV) and the audit of how domestic, sexual and gender based violence services are organised. Both these actions are key deliverables in the Justice Plan 2021.

The audit was published in July of this year. Minister O’Gorman and I agreed, in line with its key recommendations, that the Department of Justice will continue to have lead policy responsibility for DSGBV. We also recognise that the policy and operational responses of a number of other Ministers and agencies will continue to be crucial in meeting the Government’s commitment to tackle all forms of DSGBV.

My Department is leading the development across Government of the new DSGBV national strategy which will place a priority on prevention and reduction. It will be the most ambitious strategy to date and aims to radically improve services and supports for victims. The strategy is on track to be developed in consultation with all relevant Departments and stakeholders with a view to it coming to Government for approval before the end of 2021.

The new strategy will build on the experience of the last two strategies, the learning from the priority given to this work during the pandemic and the commitment and expertise of all bodies involved. The audit outcome, the current review of accommodation needs undertaken by Tusla together with the ongoing work of implementing Supporting a Victim’s Journey, will also feed into the new strategy.

It is my intention to have a draft strategy ready for a further round of public consultation in the coming weeks.

Progress is continuing to be made on delivering the recommendations arising out of the O’Malley Review, as set out in Supporting A Victims Journey. A number of important actions have already been delivered and work to progress the remaining actions is being treated as a priority by all those responsible for their delivery. When completed, this work will ensure victims have confidence that the criminal justice system will support them, keep them informed and treat them with respect and dignity at every stage of their journey through it.

The commitment of this Government to combatting domestic, sexual and gender based violence and to supporting victims is reflected in the funding allocated under Budget 2022, with a total of €13m allocated to my Department for this. This represents an increased allocation of €5.35m and will enable us to roll out specific awareness raising and training programmes to combat domestic, sexual and gender based violence. It will also allow us to provide additional supports to NGOs and specific domestic violence intervention programmes and it will support a number of front line activities.

As part of this, an additional €1.1m will be used to put in place a legal advice and legal aid service in court for victims of sexual violence and €1 million is being provided to the Garda vote to refurbish and upgrade the Divisional Protective Service Units. This will allow us to better support and protect vulnerable victims.

The additional funding secured under Budget 2022 will allow us to continue to build on the work undertaken this year. We will continue to improve the system for victims, to better support them and through various means to raise awareness of, and to combat, all forms of domestic, sexual and gender based violence.

Furthermore, I understand that Minister O’Gorman has secured an increase of €41m for Tusla under Budget 2022 which includes the budget for funding organisations that deliver frontline services, including the funding of refuge spaces.

Since 2014, this part of Tusla’s budget has almost doubled from €17.5m to €30m in 2021. While I understand Minister O’Gorman, in consultation with Tusla, is finalising the detailed allocation of funding resources to various programmes and service areas, I am assured that the budget for 2022 will allow Tusla to maintain supports for DSGBV services, which have seen a

significant increases in demand in the context of Covid-19, and to progress recommendations emerging from its review of refuge accommodation provision.

An Garda Síochána

204. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the date on which she and or her officials were first informed by the Garda Commissioner in view of a statutory obligations under section 41 of the An Garda Síochána Act 2005 to inform her of such matters without delay of the cancellation and or downgrading of computer-aided despatch and 999 calls in the first instance and further matters disclosed by the Policing Authority on 14 October 2021. [51667/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy will be aware, I consider any inappropriate cancellation of 999 calls a very serious matter. This falls significantly below the high standards that the public expect from the Gardaí and the high standards that An Garda Síochána set for themselves. I am particularly concerned that anyone experiencing domestic abuse, or indeed anyone in a vulnerable position, who summoned the courage to seek assistance may not have received it.

I can inform the Deputy that the Secretary General of my Department was first informed of this issue by An Garda Síochána by letter dated 4 December 2020. After some discussion with An Garda Síochána, the Policing Authority was asked by Minister McEntee on 5 February to oversee the review being carried by An Garda Síochána in relation to this matter, and there have been a number of engagements between the Authority and An Garda Síochána since this date.

I share the Authority's concern about the continuation of what appears to be inappropriate cancellation and classification of calls since the introduction of the new procedures. These circumstances will of course be considered by the Authority as part of their continuing oversight of the Garda review of this matter, and will be taken into account in the work being carried out by an external policing expert who has been appointed by the Policing Authority to assist them in this task.

In respect of the matters disclosed by the Policing Authority on 14 October 2021, the Deputy Garda Commissioner informed my Department on 3 September that further cancellations had taken place and that mitigation measures were being put in place to prevent such cancellations from continuing. The Deputy Commissioner also informed my Department that a senior Garda officer was conducting an investigation as a matter of urgency.

Protected Disclosures

205. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of protected disclosures she has received in respect of the cancellation of 999 calls in 2020 and to date in 2021. [51668/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy is aware, the Protected Disclosures Act was enacted in 2014 to allow employees to bring alleged wrongdoing to the attention of the appropriate authorities.

The Act also affords very important protections to persons making protected disclosures. I am sure that the Deputy will appreciate therefore that it would not be appropriate for me to comment on, nor confirm the existence of any specific protected disclosures. The protection of those

wishing to make a protected disclosure rightly prioritises the confidentiality of the process, which is central to the efficacy of that process, and in that regard it would not be appropriate for me to make a statement on the matter.

Section 22 of the Protected Disclosures Act 2014 requires public bodies to prepare and publish a report each year in relation to the previous year, on the disclosures received and dealt with under its policy, in an anonymised form.

My Department publishes annual reports in respect of Protected Disclosures received in the Department of Justice and separately on Protected Disclosures made directly to the Minister for

Justice by members/employees, or former members/employees, of An Garda Síochána.

The Annual Report for Protected Disclosures received by my Department for 2020 is available on our website at www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Department_of_Justice_Protected_Disclosures_AR_2020.pdf/Files/Department_of_Justice_Protected_Disclosures_AR_2020.pdf

The Annual Report for Protected Disclosures made directly to the Minister for Justice by workers, or former workers, of An Garda Síochána for 2020 is available on our website at justice.ie/en/JELR/PD_AGS_2020_Annual%20Report.pdf/Files/PD_AGS_2020_Annual%20Report.pdf

An Garda Síochána

206. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if the audio recordings in respect of the cancellation of 999 calls and computer-aided despatch are being preserved and all essential data which illustrates the scope and the scale of this matter will be preserved to enable any reviews that are taking place. [51670/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I am informed by the Garda authorities that all 999/112 emergency calls for service to An Garda Síochána are answered at the four Garda Regional Communications Centres/Rooms. As per Garda policy and procedures, 999/112 emergency calls for service are recorded and retained for a period of seven years. I am further informed that recorded call data can be extracted and stored separately for the purpose of specific investigations when required.

As the Deputy will be aware, I consider any inappropriate cancellation of 999 calls a very serious matter. This falls significantly below the high standards that the public expect from the Gardaí and the high standards that An Garda Síochána set for themselves. I am particularly concerned that anyone experiencing domestic abuse, or indeed anyone in a vulnerable position, who summoned the courage to seek assistance may not have received it.

The Policing Authority was asked by Minister McEntee to oversee the review being carried by An Garda Síochána in relation to this matter, and there have been a number of engagements between the Authority and An Garda Síochána since March of this year.

I share the Authority and the Commissioner's concern about the continuation of what appear to be inappropriate cancellation and classification of calls since the introduction of the new procedures. These circumstances will of course be considered by the Authority as part of their continuing oversight of the Garda review of this matter, and will be taken into account in the work being carried out by an external policing expert who has been appointed to assist the Au-

thority in this task. I await the outcome of the Authority's work in this regard.

I will of course consider any recommendations the Authority choses to make regarding the future management of these matters.

An Garda Síochána

207. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice the number of Garda civilian staff recruited in each of the years 2018 to 2020 and to date in 2021, by county in tabular form. [51697/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy will be aware, Garda numbers have increased substantially in recent years, from 12,943 Garda members and 1,999 Garda staff in 2016 to 14,345 Garda members and 3,172 staff at the end of September this year.

I am pleased to note that Budget 2022 commits to the further recruitment of an additional 800 Gardaí next year and to the recruitment of an additional 400 Garda staff.

The below table shows Garda staff recruited from 2018 to date, by each year and by county.

County / Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	Grand Total
Carlow	4	4	3		11
Cavan	1	8	4	6	19
Clare	6	20	9	8	43
Cork	22	56	42	19	139
Donegal	3	14	11	12	40
Dublin	223	508	200	195	1126
Galway	16	38	26	10	90
Kerry	5	11	7	7	30
Kildare	4	11	6	2	23
Kilkenny	17	16	11		44
Laois	2	7	5	7	21
Leitrim	1	5		1	7
Limerick	11	28	20	13	72
Longford	2	8	2		12
Louth	7	15	11		33
Mayo	43	49	32	37	161
Meath	21	53	21	14	109
Monaghan	1	13	4	5	23
Offaly	1	3	2	1	7
Roscommon	5	15	3	1	24
Sligo	5	11	8	2	26
Tipperary	47	85	54	24	210
Waterford	10	35	17	18	80
Westmeath	2	14	6	3	25
Wexford	6	12	6	9	33
Wicklow	3	10	9	4	26
Grand Total	468	1049	519	398	2434*

*Figures include open recruitment, internal recruitment and mobility.

It may also be of interest to the Deputy that current and historical data of Garda Staff levels are available on the Department of Justice website at the following address - http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Staff

An Garda Síochána

208. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Justice the progress made on the development of a new Garda station in Kickham Barracks, Clonmel, County Tipperary; the further engagement that has taken place between her Department, the National Development Finance Agency and the OPW for this development; when is it envisaged that contracts will be awarded for construction; if the commencement date for construction and completion can be provided; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51698/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda Commissioner is, by law, responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána and for the effective and efficient deployment of Garda resources, including Garda stations.

Following a review of An Garda Síochána's accommodation requirements, the Commissioner decided that a Public Private Partnership (PPP) should proceed to deliver new stations in Macroom and in Clonmel.

I am advised by the Garda authorities that the acquisition of the site for the development of a new station in Clonmel has been completed and that An Garda Síochána has provided a brief of requirements for the new station at Clonmel to the OPW so that it may develop designs for the new station, with associated costs.

The OPW has advised that a Part IX planning application for the new Garda Station in Clonmel was submitted in mid-October 2020 and, following assessment of a number of submissions received by the end of the six-week period, the planning application was granted in early 2021.

There is ongoing engagement between my Department, an Garda Síochána, the OPW and the National Development Finance Agency (NDFA) (which is the procuring authority for PPPs) to progress the Garda PPP project, with a view to the tender process for this Garda PPP project commencing in 2022.

Immigration Policy

209. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice further to Parliamentary Question No. 428 of 12 October 2021, the way in which her Department accommodates those impacted by the booking of immigration appointments by third party agents;; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51703/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): As outlined to the Deputy in my reply to Parliamentary Question no. 428, my Department is aware that there have been issues in the past around the securing of registration appointments. My Department has continually introduced software fixes designed to prevent such abuses of the system. These new measures have been partly successful in preventing the block booking of appointments by third party agents. I can assure the Deputy that my Department is continually working to establish further methods to mitigate against this unregulated practice.

Customers should continue to apply directly for appointments as they become available without charge, through the online appointments system: burghquayregistrationoffice.inis.gov.ie.

A tender has been awarded for a new Immigration Service appointment and scheduling system, which will streamline and further improve the registration process. The new system is expected to be available to customers in November 2021.

Mental Health Services

210. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51638/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy's question relates to a service matter, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Hospital Procedures

211. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the number of terminations of pregnancy that were carried out in St. Vincent's University Hospital in each of the years from 2016 to 2020; the number of surgical sterilisation procedures that were carried out on women in St. Vincent's University Hospital in each of the years from 2016 to 2020; the number of surgical sterilisation procedures that were carried out on men in St. Vincent's University Hospital in each of the years from 2016 to 2020; and the number of IVF and assisted reproduction procedures that were carried out in St. Vincent's University Hospital in each of the years from 2016 to 2020. [51340/21]

212. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the number of terminations of pregnancy that were carried out in the National Maternity Hospital, Holles Street in each of the years from 2016 to 2020; the number of surgical sterilisation procedures that were carried out on women in the National Maternity Hospital, Holles Street in each of the years from 2016 to 2020; the number of surgical sterilisation procedures that were carried out on men in the National Maternity Hospital, Holles Street in each of the years from 2016 to 2020; and the number of IVF and assisted reproduction procedures that were carried out in National Maternity Hospital, Holles Street in each of the years from 2016 to 2020. [51341/21]

213. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the number of terminations of pregnancy that were carried out in St. Michael's Hospital, Dún Laoghaire in each of the years from 2016 to 2020; the number of surgical sterilisation procedures that were carried out on women in St. Michael's Hospital, Dún Laoghaire in each of the years from 2016 to 2020; the number of surgical sterilisation procedures that were carried out on men in St. Michael's Hospital, Dún Laoghaire in each of the years from 2016 to 2020; and the number of IVF and assisted reproduction procedures that were carried out in St. Michael's Hospital, Dún Laoghaire in each of the years from 2016 to 2020. [51342/21]

214. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the number of terminations of pregnancy that were carried out in Mater Misericordiae University Hospital in each of the years from 2016 to 2020 inclusive; the number of surgical sterilisation procedures that were carried out on women in Mater Misericordiae University Hospital in each of the years from 2016 to 2020 inclusive; the number of surgical sterilisation procedures that were carried out on men in

Mater Misericordiae University Hospital in each of the years from 2016 to 2020 inclusive; and the number of IVF/assisted reproduction procedures that were carried out in Mater Misericordiae University Hospital in each of the years from 2016 to 2020 inclusive. [51343/21]

215. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the number of terminations of pregnancy that were carried out in Tallaght University Hospital in each of the years from 2016 to 2020 inclusive; the number of surgical sterilisation procedures that were carried out on women in Tallaght University Hospital in each of the years from 2016 to 2020 inclusive; the number of surgical sterilisation procedures that were carried out on men in Tallaght University Hospital in each of the years from 2016 to 2020 inclusive; and the number of IVF/assisted reproduction procedures that were carried out in Tallaght University Hospital in each of the years from 2016 to 2020 inclusive. [51344/21]

216. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the number of terminations of pregnancy that were carried out in the Rotunda Hospital in each of the years from 2016 to 2020 inclusive; the number of surgical sterilisation procedures that were carried out on women in the Rotunda Hospital in each of the years from 2016 to 2020 inclusive; the number of surgical sterilisation procedures that were carried out on men in the Rotunda Hospital in each of the years from 2016 to 2020 inclusive; and the number of IVF/assisted reproduction procedures that were carried out in the Rotunda Hospital in each of the years from 2016 to 2020 inclusive. [51345/21]

217. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the number of terminations of pregnancy that were carried out in the St. James's Hospital in each of the years from 2016 to 2020; the number of surgical sterilisation procedures that were carried out on women in St. James's Hospital in each of the years from 2016 to 2020; the number of surgical sterilisation procedures that were carried out on men in St. James's Hospital in each of the years from 2016 to 2020; and the number of IVF and assisted reproduction procedures that were carried out in St. James's Hospital in each of the years from 2016 to 2020. [51346/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216 and 217 together.

My Department does not routinely collect or hold the information being requested in this Parliamentary Question. The query relates to health services, which is a matter for the Health Service Executive (HSE). As such, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Question No. 212 answered with Question No. 211.

Question No. 213 answered with Question No. 211.

Question No. 214 answered with Question No. 211.

Question No. 215 answered with Question No. 211.

Question No. 216 answered with Question No. 211.

Question No. 217 answered with Question No. 211.

Hospital Appointments Status

218. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health if it will be ensured that a person (details supplied) receives medical attention; and if he will make a statement on the

matter. [51365/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Staff

219. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Health the number of neurology nurse specialists based in University Hospital Limerick; if this complement of neurology nurse specialists based in University Hospital Limerick complies with national and international guidelines which has made a recommendation that there should be a minimum of 11 neurology nurse specialists based in University Hospital Limerick; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51380/21]

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

220. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients who are currently waiting for diagnosis and treatment in the neurology department of University Hospital Limerick since January 2019 to September 2021; the number of these patients who are on the waiting list for treatment are waiting longer than the national guidelines for same by county in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51381/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted in the last nineteen 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.

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.

On the 7th October I published the Acute Waiting List Action Plan. This plan, to run until December 2021, has a series of targeted measures that are designed to address the growth in waiting lists caused by Covid-19 and the cyber-attack.

In addition, my Department, the HSE and the NTPF are also working on a Multi Annual Waiting List Plan to bring waiting lists in line with Sláintecare targets over the coming years.

For 2022 an additional allocation of €250 million, comprised of €200 million to the HSE and €50 million to the National Treatment Purchase Fund has been provided in respect of work to reduce hospital and community waiting lists. The €250 million will be used to fund additional activity in both the public and private sectors. The €50 million additional funding provided to the NTPF brings its total allocation for 2022 to €150 million, and as a consequence there will be a budget of €350 million available to support vital initiatives to improve access to acute hospitals and community health services.

In relation to the data requested by the Deputy, the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) collect, collate and publish waiting lists in respect of outpatient specialties and inpatient/daycase procedures. Waiting times can be examined in terms of the appointment or procedure that a patient is waiting for, however, it is not possible for the NTPF to identify patients based on their clinical diagnosis.

The attached document details the outpatient waiting list for Neurology in University Hospital Limerick by area of residence. The number of patients waiting longer than the national guidelines would be a service/clinical matter and I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly on this as soon as possible.

[Grants]

Ambulance Service

221. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the number of public ambulances available in the Dublin area in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51408/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Services

222. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health his plans to increase the level of service provision at the National Orthopaedic Hospital, Cappagh; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51410/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Dental Services

223. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health the reason a person (details supplied) is waiting so long for a dental appointment in Cavan General Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51411/21]

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

224. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his plans to recognise fibromyalgia as a disability; his plans to update the long-term illness scheme to include this condition; his plans to introduce necessary supports and services for persons with fibromyalgia; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51428/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Fibromyalgia is a condition characterized by severe pain, fatigue and stiffness, among many other symptoms. Fibromyalgia can be a difficult condition to diagnose because there is no specific test and the symptoms can be similar to those of other conditions. Treatment often requires interventions from various medical specialists for management of symptoms as they arise. Fibromyalgia is not classified as a disability and there are currently no plans for its reclassification.

The Long Term Illness Scheme was established under Section 59(3) of the Health Act 1970 (as amended). The conditions covered by the scheme are: acute leukaemia; mental handicap; cerebral palsy; mental illness (in a person under 16); cystic fibrosis; multiple sclerosis; diabetes insipidus; muscular dystrophies; diabetes mellitus; parkinsonism; epilepsy; phenylketonuria; haemophilia; spina bifida; hydrocephalus; and conditions arising from the use of Thalidomide.

Under the Scheme, patients receive drugs, medicines, and medical and surgical appliances directly related to the treatment of their illness, free of charge. There are no plans to extend the list of conditions covered by the Scheme at this time. However, a review of the current eligibility framework, including the basis for existing hospital and medication charges, will be carried out under commitments given in the Sláintecare Implementation Strategy.

In the meantime, for people who are not eligible for the Long Term Illness Scheme, there are other arrangements which protect them from excessive medicine costs.

Under the Drugs Payment Scheme, no individual or family pays more than €114 a month towards the cost of approved prescribed medicines. The Scheme significantly reduces the cost burden for families and individuals with ongoing expenditure on medicines.

People who cannot, without undue hardship, arrange for the provision of medical services for themselves and their dependants may be eligible for a medical card. In accordance with the provisions of the Health Act 1970 (as amended), eligibility for a medical card is determined by the HSE.

In certain circumstances the HSE may exercise discretion and grant a medical card, even though an applicant exceeds the income guidelines, where he or she faces difficult financial circumstances, such as extra costs arising from illness. The HSE afford applicants the opportunity to furnish supporting documentation to determine whether undue hardship exists and to fully take account of all relevant circumstances that may benefit them in assessment, including medical evidence of costs and certain expenses.

In circumstances where an applicant is still over the income limit for a medical card, they are then assessed for a GP visit card, which entitles the applicant to GP visits without charge.

Health Service Executive

225. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 351 of 14 July 2021, the reason the HSE is not funding counselling and educational doctoral courses in line with clinical psychology doctoral courses; and if he will make a statement

on the matter. [51430/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Report of the Psychology Review Implementation Group in 2017 expanded the care group employment available to counselling and educational psychologists. The report's recommendation led to the establishment of a Project Team to implement this recommendation.

In February 2019, HSE Community Operations convened a Project Team, chaired by Dr Cathal Morgan, comprised of representatives from Clinical, Counselling and Educational Psychology; Social Care, Disability, and Mental Health services; Community and Acute services; Operational and National HR; and the Health and Social Care Professions office.

The Project Team was tasked with, inter alia, considering the preparation of a workforce plan for psychological services in the HSE, including an examination of the current framework for training psychologists for the health service, and the type, and skill-mix, required for the future. The work of the Project Team has been informed by a thorough stakeholder consultation process.

Clinical Psychology Trainees, on the doctoral programme, are HSE employees and are in receipt of partial funding (60%) of Higher Education Institution (HEI) fees each year. Traditionally the educational and counselling psychologists' courses have not been funded by the HSE. The HSE does not employ or contribute to HEI fees for Counselling and Educational Psychologists during their doctoral training.

The Report of the National Psychology Project Team – Establishment of a National Psychology Placement Office and Workforce Planning was completed in January 2021. The Report contains a plan to address a range of matters in relation to psychology through establishment of a placement office and workforce planning. Implementation of the report's recommendations and the creation of a National Psychology Placement Office are a matter for the HSE in the context of available resources.

Health Services

226. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider including fibromyalgia as a specified condition under the long-term illness scheme; the reason it has not been recognised or included up until now; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51443/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Long Term Illness Scheme was established under Section 59(3) of the Health Act 1970 (as amended). The conditions covered by the scheme are: acute leukaemia; mental handicap; cerebral palsy; mental illness (in a person under 16); cystic fibrosis; multiple sclerosis; diabetes insipidus; muscular dystrophies; diabetes mellitus; parkinsonism; epilepsy; phenylketonuria; haemophilia; spina bifida; hydrocephalus; and conditions arising from the use of Thalidomide.

Under the Scheme, patients receive drugs, medicines, and medical and surgical appliances directly related to the treatment of their illness, free of charge. There are no plans to extend the list of conditions covered by the Scheme at this time. However, a review of the current eligibility framework, including the basis for existing hospital and medication charges, will be carried out under commitments given in the Sláintecare Implementation Strategy.

In the meantime, for people who are not eligible for the Long Term Illness Scheme, there are other arrangements which protect them from excessive medicine costs.

Under the Drugs Payment Scheme, no individual or family pays more than €114 a month towards the cost of approved prescribed medicines. The Scheme significantly reduces the cost burden for families and individuals with ongoing expenditure on medicines.

People who cannot, without undue hardship, arrange for the provision of medical services for themselves and their dependants may be eligible for a medical card. In accordance with the provisions of the Health Act 1970 (as amended), eligibility for a medical card is determined by the HSE.

In certain circumstances the HSE may exercise discretion and grant a medical card, even though an applicant exceeds the income guidelines, where he or she faces difficult financial circumstances, such as extra costs arising from illness. The HSE afford applicants the opportunity to furnish supporting documentation to determine whether undue hardship exists and to fully take account of all relevant circumstances that may benefit them in assessment, including medical evidence of costs and certain expenses.

In circumstances where an applicant is still over the income limit for a medical card, they are then assessed for a GP visit card, which entitles the applicant to GP visits without charge.

Vaccination Programme

227. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health his plans for the roll out of Covid-19 booster vaccinations for residents of elderly care homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51444/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): On 8 September, I announced an update to the Covid-19 vaccination programme following advice from the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC).

The NIAC 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 (LTRCFs) and for those aged 80 years and older living in the community. The booster dose can be given after a minimum interval of six months following completion of the primary vaccination schedule.

I have accepted this advice and the HSE has made the necessary arrangements to operationalise these recommendations with the booster rollout now underway.

The NIAC has now recommended that a booster dose of Pfizer/BioNTech should be offered to all those aged 60-79 who have completed their primary vaccination course with any Covid-19 vaccination. The booster dose should be ideally given 6 months following completion of the primary vaccination schedule (with a minimum interval of 5 months).

The NIAC continues to examine emerging evidence regarding booster vaccines for those with waning immunity and reduced effectiveness in other groups. As the logistics of the rollout are a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Vaccination Programme

228. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health his plans for the roll out of Covid-19 booster vaccinations for frontline healthcare workers of elderly care homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51445/21]

229. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health his plans for the roll out of Covid-19 booster vaccinations for frontline healthcare workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51446/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 228 and 229 together.

On 8 September, I announced an update to the Covid-19 vaccination programme following advice from the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC).

The NIAC 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. The booster dose can be given after a minimum interval of six months following completion of the primary vaccination schedule.

I have accepted this advice and the HSE has made the necessary arrangements to operationalise these recommendations with the booster rollout now underway.

The NIAC has now recommended that a booster dose of Pfizer/BioNTech should be offered to all those aged 60-79 who have completed their primary vaccination course with any Covid-19 vaccination. The booster dose should be ideally given 6 months following completion of the primary vaccination schedule (with a minimum interval of 5 months).

The NIAC continues to examine emerging evidence regarding booster vaccines for those with waning immunity and reduced effectiveness in other groups, such as those with co-morbidities (under 60 years of age) and healthcare workers and will make further recommendations if required. I have asked the Chief Medical Officer to ensure that the NIAC examine whether there is a clinical need for healthcare workers to receive booster vaccines.

Question No. 229 answered with Question No. 228.

Health Services

230. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if the Northern Ireland planned healthcare scheme will continue on an administrative basis beyond the end of 2021 pending the enactment of legislation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51461/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Northern Ireland Planned Healthcare Scheme (NI PHS) has been in effective operation since 1 January 2021. This Scheme was introduced to mitigate the loss of access to care from private providers in Northern Ireland under the EU Cross Border Directive, which ceased to apply as a result of Brexit. The Government intends to place the administrative NI PHS on a statutory basis and an extensive examination of options to inform the drafting of a General Scheme is currently underway. I can confirm that the administrative scheme will remain until such time that a statutory scheme is in place.

Patients also continue to have access to health services under the EU Cross Border Directive Scheme in all other remaining EU/EEA countries.

Hospital Waiting Lists

231. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on a waiting list for speech and language therapy by CHO, age category and time waiting, in tabular form. [51470/21]

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 Waiting Lists

232. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on a waiting list for physiotherapy by CHO and age category and time waiting, in tabular form. [51471/21]

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

233. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on a waiting list for homecare packages; the number of persons experiencing delayed discharge from hospital due to a delay accessing home care; and the waiting lists for home care packages by CHO and LHO, in tabular form. [51472/21]

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.

Home Care Packages

234. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on a waiting list for assessment for home care packages by CHO, age, category and time waiting, in tabular form. [51473/21]

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

235. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on a waiting list for occupational therapy by CHO, age category and time waiting, in tabular form. [51474/21]

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

236. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of children and young persons on waiting lists for an assessment of need by CHO, age category and time waiting, in tabular form. [51475/21]

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 Waiting Lists

237. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on a waiting list for ophthalmology by CHO, age category and time waiting, in tabular form. [51476/21]

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

238. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on a waiting list for audiology by CHO, age category and time waiting, in tabular form. [51477/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Mental Health Services

239. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on a waiting list for community psychology services by CHO, age category and time waiting, in tabular form. [51478/21]

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.

Mental Health Services

240. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on a waiting list for counselling services by CHO, age category and time waiting, in tabular form. [51479/21]

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.

Mental Health Services

241. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on a waiting list for CAMHS by CHO, age category and time waiting, in tabular form. [51480/21]

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.

Hospital Waiting Lists

242. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of children and young persons on a waiting list for scoliosis surgery; the current wait time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51481/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I sincerely regret that children can experience a long waiting time for hospital appointments and treatment, and I remain conscious of the burden that this places on them and their families.

My priority as Minister for Health, and that of this Government, is to improve waiting times for all patients accessing hospital treatment, and reducing the paediatric waiting list for orthopaedic procedures remains a priority within that.

My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) are working on a Multi Annual Waiting List Plan to address waiting lists and bring them in line with Sláinte targets over the coming years. This process will be overseen by a Ministerial Taskforce chaired by the Secretary General of my Department and including representatives from the HSE and National Treatment Purchase Fund. It will take the learnings from the achievements of the Vaccine Taskforce to inform the plan.

An additional €250 million is being provided in Budget 2022 to improve access to care across the health system.

It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted in the last nineteen months as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic and more recently as a result of the ransomware attack.

The cyber-attack in May 2021 in particular, caused significant disruption to the orthopaedic service and all services across the Children's Health Ireland Hospital Group. Children's Health Ireland advise that without access to a patient's full history and previous diagnostic investigations, it was not considered safe to proceed without all electronic support systems in place. This impacted patients with complex needs in particular, and restricted the patient cohort that could safely proceed with surgery during this time.

Most systems are now back up and running across CHI sites, but back-loading of information is ongoing, and this continues to have an impact on waiting lists and the number of surgeries completed.

Despite the impact of the pandemic and the cyberattack Children's Health Ireland advise that as of the end of September 2021, 266 spinal surgeries had been carried out which is an increase of 41 compared to the same period last year.

CHI remain committed to increasing activity levels and examining innovative methods to improve access to all specialities. For example, additional theatre sessions are being held in Cappagh National Orthopaedic Hospital, for non-complex, age-appropriate orthopaedic pa-

tients.

CHI also continues to develop the Advanced Clinical Triage clinic model in City West. Active Clinical Triage is a system which has been adapted for use within the paediatric orthopaedic unit at CHI Crumlin and its purpose is to reduce the overall orthopaedics out-patient waiting list, starting with the longest waiting clinically appropriate referrals.

A new Orthopaedic Consultant with a special interest in neuromuscular conditions started in Temple Street in September which should also enable the use of additional theatre capacity and support additional capacity as part of the Cappagh Kids programme.

Officials in the Department of Health remain in regular contact with CHI regarding scoliosis services. CHI have advised that all patients with a diagnosis of scoliosis require a pre-operative work-up prior to spinal surgery, including multiple diagnostic investigations and review by a multi-disciplinary team. The plan of care which is implemented for each patient is tailored to best meet the patient's clinical requirements. It is the responsibility of the treating Consultant to clinically prioritise patients for surgery on the waiting list.

In relation to the specific issue raised by the Deputy, as this is an operational matters, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Staff

243. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health when the recruitment of epilepsy nurse specialist posts as laid out in the pregnancy prevention programme is to be completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51485/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this question relates to operational matters for the Health Service Executive (HSE), I have asked that the HSE responds to the Deputy directly.

Mental Health Services

244. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide a comprehensive report on the mental health budget for 2021: the budget allocated; the way in which it was spent; the services it was spent on; the details of overspends or underspends; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51492/21]

248. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health when the 2021 mental health budget was released to his Department: the amount which was not released; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51496/21]

249. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the amount of funding from the mental health budget which has been withheld from the HSE by his Department in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51497/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I propose to take Questions Nos. 244, 248 and 249 together.

2021 saw a then record budget for mental health of over €1.114 billion, including €23 million to commence implementation of many of the short-term recommendations of *Sharing the Vision* in 2021 and the HSE National Service Plan (NSP) and €15 million to address the addi-

tional challenges posed by Covid-19.

An additional €10 million in once off funding has been made available for further investment in mental health services in 2021, with a particular emphasis on community and voluntary based supports.

As part of the annual budgetary process the Department releases funding for specific new initiatives set out in the HSE's National Service Plan subject to the receipt, review and approval of implementation plans in relation to each initiative.

Of the €23 million for new initiatives, €8.737 million has been released to the HSE. This funding has enabled the HSE to progress specific initiatives, including crisis resolution teams, peer support programmes, individual placement supports, development of the national clinical programmes, the recently launched DBT training programme and the recruitment of a bereavement co-ordinator under *Connecting for Life*, the National Strategy to Reduce Suicide.

The Deputy will be aware that the pandemic and the cyber-attack have caused difficulties across the entirety of the health service, including Mental Health Services. Recruitment and retention of staff also remain difficulties that are continually being addressed through national and international advertising campaigns.

Mental Health Services

245. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the percentage of the health budget that is dedicated to mental health provision in each of the years 2019 to 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51493/21]

254. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the total mental health budget between 2020 to 2022, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51502/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I propose to take Questions Nos. 245 and 254 together.

The final allocation for all health service areas is set out in the relevant HSE National Service Plans. The Mental Health Services allocations for the years 2019 – 2022, as set out in the relevant Plans, are set out in the table below. The precise allocation for 2022 will be finalised as part of the National Service Plan process for 2022:

Year	Allocation per NSP	% of Health Budget
2019	€0.987b	6.3%
2020	€1.031b	5.2%
2021	€1.114b	5.4%
2022	€1.149b	5.4%

An additional €10 million was announced last week, as a once off funding measure, for investment in mental health services in 2021, with a particular focus on supporting the community and voluntary pillar.

Budget 2022 highlights the Government's continued commitment to mental health by the allocation of an additional €47 million to the HSE Mental Health Services Budget, comprising €24 million for new developments, €13 million for existing level of service and €10 million in once off funding for COVID-19.

Mental Health Services

246. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the funding available from Budget 2022 for community mental health services that do not receive funding through the HSE or other Departments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51494/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The development of all aspects of mental health services remains a priority for Government. This is reflected in the current Programme for Government, *Sharing the Vision - A Mental Health Policy for Everyone*, and the HSE National Service Plans.

2022 will see another record budget of €1.149 billion for mental health services. This includes an additional €47 million for next year and comprises €24 million for new developments, €13 million for existing levels of service and €10 million in once off funding for mental health initiatives in response to Covid.

An additional €10 million once off funding has been made available for further investment in mental health services in 2021, with a particular emphasis on community and voluntary based supports. Plans for this funding are currently being finalised by Minister Butler and the Department in liaison with the HSE.

Of note, multiple funding streams are available from other departments and agencies for mental health supports. For example, Pobal managed funds and the LEADER fund.

The Government as whole is committed to ensuring continued investment in mental health so that we can further improve and enhance our mental health services and supports.

Mental Health Services

247. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the areas in which the €13 million allocated for existing mental health services in Budget 2022 will be spent; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51495/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): Budget 2022 saw another record budget allocation for mental health services of €1.149 billion. This is an increase of €47 million on 2021, comprising €24 million for new developments, €13 million for existing level of service and €10 million for mental health initiatives in response to Covid.

The €13 million for existing level of service has been allocated to the HSE as part of its overall budget for core mental health services and details of the services to be provided will be finalised in the context of the National Service Plan 2022 process.

Question No. 248 answered with Question No. 244.

Question No. 249 answered with Question No. 244.

Mental Health Services

250. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the monies returned unspent to the Exchequer from the HSE CAMHS budget in each year from 2019 to 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51498/21]

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.

Mental Health Services

251. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the funds returned unspent to the Exchequer from the budget of his Department in 2018 and 2019, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51499/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Deputy should note that no funding was returned to the exchequer from the Department of Health (Vote 38) in 2018 or 2019.

In 2018 and 2019 additional funding was approved for Vote 38 by the Oireachtas through a Supplementary Estimate.

Budget 2022

252. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the way in which the €24 million for new developments in Budget 2022 will be spent; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51500/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): Budget 2022 saw another record budget allocation for mental health services of €1.149 billion. An additional €47 million has been added to the Mental Health Services budget, comprising €24 million for new developments, €10 million for mental health initiatives in response to Covid and €13 million for existing level of service.

Separately, another €10 million is being made available in 2021, aimed at supporting the community and voluntary pillar in the mental health sector.

The €24 million is being prioritised for the continued development of mental health services, including out of hours supports, CAMHS and mental health clinical programmes. It provides for the recruitment of 350 whole time equivalent staff. Mental health services for older people will also be developed, in line with the model of care for specialist mental health services for older people that will be piloted next year.

€6 million will be used to continue to enhance the capacity of community mental health teams, with a particular emphasis on CAMHS, while there will be over €1.4 million in new funding for crisis resolution services. Another €1.15 million will be allocated to continue the roll out of specialist eating disorder teams in CHOs 1, 3, 5 and 6. Other initiatives include recovery focused supports, including peer supports, employment supports and recovery colleges.

The details of the initiatives to be funded will be finalised as part of the National Service Plan process.

Mental Health Services

253. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health if he will report on Sharing the Vision recommendations for Budget 2020 and 2021; the status of each recommendation; and if he

will make a statement on the matter. [51501/21]

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.

Question No. 254 answered with Question No. 245.

Healthcare Policy

255. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if he plans to update the National Positive Aging Strategy given that it has not been updated in over eight years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51511/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The National Positive Ageing Strategy is a high level document outlining Ireland's vision for ageing and older people and the national goals and objectives required to promote positive ageing. It is an over-arching cross-departmental policy that has influenced policy and service delivery across Government since inception.

Significant developments have been, and continue to be, made in promoting positive ageing since the Strategy launched in 2013. In relation to the Programme for Government commitment to an age friendly Ireland progress is being made on commitments to increase home and community supports and housing options for older people. In particular, Sláintecare which envisages older people being supported to live well in their own homes for as long as possible sets out an overarching vision for care in our community and enabling older people to live longer at home. New projects such as the Healthy Age Friendly Homes Programme, the establishment of a Statutory Home Support Scheme, Integrated Care Packages for Older People (ICPOP) are just some examples of the progress we are making across government, agencies and with stakeholders in the community to increase the positive experience of ageing. The establishment of Age Friendly Ireland as a shared service for older people nationally is a further significant achievement.

Since the National Positive Ageing Strategy my Department has developed a significant body of research to inform an evidence based approach to policy making for older people in partnership with the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) and the research initiative set up on foot of the Positive Ageing Strategy i.e. HaPAI.

Across Government we will continue to prioritise improvements for older people in Ireland by focusing on the effective implementation and delivery of outcomes envisaged in Sláintecare, Housing For All and other focused strategies such as the National Dementia Strategy.

Healthcare Policy

256. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health his views on whether nutrition and hydration plays an important role in positive aging; if so, if he will commit to the inclusion of nutrition and hydration going forward; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51512/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): Positive aging is an issue I am very interested in and for that reason, I requested the Food Safety Authority of Ireland ("FSAI") Scientific Committee to prepare a report on the Scientific Recommenda-

tions for Food- Based Dietary Guidelines for older people aged 65 and over. Hydration is also included in these recommendations which were published earlier this year. Healthy Ireland in my Department are developing nutrition resources (including advice on hydration) for this age group based on the FSAI scientific recommendations. These resources will be available early in 2022.

Hospital Staff

257. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health if it is intended to recruit more neurology nurse specialists across the country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51522/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Healthcare Policy

258. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health if fibromyalgia will be recognised as a disability and a long-term illness; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51524/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Fibromyalgia is a condition characterized by severe pain, fatigue and stiffness, among many other symptoms. Fibromyalgia can be a difficult condition to diagnose because there is no specific test and the symptoms can be similar to those of other conditions. Treatment often requires interventions from various medical specialists for management of symptoms as they arise. Fibromyalgia is not classified as a disability and there are currently no plans for its reclassification.

The Long Term Illness Scheme was established under Section 59(3) of the Health Act 1970 (as amended). The conditions covered by the scheme are: acute leukaemia; mental handicap; cerebral palsy; mental illness (in a person under 16); cystic fibrosis; multiple sclerosis; diabetes insipidus; muscular dystrophies; diabetes mellitus; parkinsonism; epilepsy; phenylketonuria; haemophilia; spina bifida; hydrocephalus; and conditions arising from the use of Thalidomide.

Under the Scheme, patients receive drugs, medicines, and medical and surgical appliances directly related to the treatment of their illness, free of charge. There are no plans to extend the list of conditions covered by the Scheme at this time. However, a review of the current eligibility framework, including the basis for existing hospital and medication charges, will be carried out under commitments given in the Sláintecare Implementation Strategy.

In the meantime, for people who are not eligible for the Long Term Illness Scheme, there are other arrangements which protect them from excessive medicine costs.

Under the Drugs Payment Scheme, no individual or family pays more than €114 a month towards the cost of approved prescribed medicines. The Scheme significantly reduces the cost burden for families and individuals with ongoing expenditure on medicines.

People who cannot, without undue hardship, arrange for the provision of medical services for themselves and their dependants may be eligible for a medical card. In accordance with the provisions of the Health Act 1970 (as amended), eligibility for a medical card is determined by the HSE. In certain circumstances the HSE may exercise discretion and grant a medical card,

even though an applicant exceeds the income guidelines, where he or she faces difficult financial circumstances, such as extra costs arising from illness.

The HSE afford applicants the opportunity to furnish supporting documentation to determine whether undue hardship exists and to fully take account of all relevant circumstances that may benefit them in assessment, including medical evidence of costs and certain expenses.

In circumstances where an applicant is still over the income limit for a medical card, they are then assessed for a GP visit card, which entitles the applicant to GP visits without charge.

Cannabis for Medicinal Use

259. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health if he will include chronic pain such as that suffered by persons with fibromyalgia as criteria to apply for the medical cannabis access programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51525/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health Products Regulatory Authority’s “Cannabis for Medical Review Use – A Scientific Review” advised that treatment with cannabis is only permitted under a controlled access programme for the treatment of patients with;

- a. Spasticity associated with multiple sclerosis resistant to all standard therapies and interventions whilst under expert medical supervision;
- b. Intractable nausea and vomiting associated with chemotherapy, despite the use of standard anti-emetic regimes whilst under expert medical supervision;
- c. Severe, refractory (treatment-resistant) epilepsy that has failed to respond to standard anticonvulsant medications whilst under expert medical supervision.

The HPRA did not consider that the available evidence supported the use of cannabis in other medical conditions.

Subsequently the Minister for Health established an Expert Reference Group to advise on the development of a Medical Cannabis Access Programme. This Group developed detailed Clinical Guidelines for the MCAP to be followed by clinicians, which contained inter alia guidance on ingredient combinations that are recommended for each of the three indications included in the MCAP

The Department is currently working to commence a new clinical review that will continue the work of the previous clinical expert group. This review will seek to build on evidence found in the earlier study and will assess if there is new information to support the addition of any other clinical indications to the MCAP.

Cannabis for Medicinal Use

260. **Deputy Joe O’Brien** asked the Minister for Health if he has examined the regulations and legislation that apply to cannabis use for medical conditions and palliative care having regard to the experience in Northern Ireland and Great Britain as set out in the Programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51530/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Programme for Government Com-

mitment is to “Examine the regulations and legislation that apply to cannabis use for medical conditions and palliative care having regard to the experience in Northern Ireland and Great Britain”

Having set out the current frameworks in relation to access medicinal cannabis products in Ireland, in order to progress this commitment it will be necessary to liaise with colleagues in Northern Ireland and Great Britain to examine the legislation and regulations in place, how their legislation has been implemented, what they have learned from both and where that can be applied in the Irish context.

Officials in my Department are have already met with their counterparts in the UK Department of Health and Social Care in order to commence the examination of the regulations and legislation. It is planned that officials from both Departments will meet on a regular basis to exchange information.

Cannabis for Medicinal Use

261. **Deputy Joe O’Brien** asked the Minister for Health his plans to widen the strict criteria by which a patient can gain access to medicinal cannabis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51532/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health Products Regulatory Authority’s “Cannabis for Medical Review Use – A Scientific Review” advised that treatment with cannabis is only permitted under a controlled access programme for the treatment of patients with;

- a. Spasticity associated with multiple sclerosis resistant to all standard therapies and interventions whilst under expert medical supervision;
- b. Intractable nausea and vomiting associated with chemotherapy, despite the use of standard anti-emetic regimes whilst under expert medical supervision;
- c. Severe, refractory (treatment-resistant) epilepsy that has failed to respond to standard anticonvulsant medications whilst under expert medical supervision.

The HPRA did not consider that the available evidence supported the use of cannabis in other medical conditions.

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The Department is currently working to commence a new clinical review that will continue the work of the previous clinical expert group. This review will seek to build on evidence found in the earlier study and will assess if there is new information to support the addition of any other clinical indications to the MCAP.

Clinicians may continue to utilise the Ministerial licencing route pursuant to Section 14 of the Misuse of Drugs Act to prescribe medical cannabis for their patients, should they wish to do so.

In line with the Chief Medical Officer’s advice, the granting of a licence for cannabis for

medical purposes must be premised on an appropriate application being submitted to the Department of Health, which is endorsed by a consultant who is responsible for the management of the patient and who is prepared to monitor the effects of the treatment over time.

Budget 2022

262. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health the amount of the additional €6 million announced in Budget 2022 for the drugs strategy will go to the drug and alcohol task force drug projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51533/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): In Budget 2022, an additional €6m was provided for new measures to support the implementation of the national drugs strategy, ‘Reducing Harm Supporting Recovery’. This funding will be used to strengthen the health-led approach to drug and alcohol use and to support the strategic priorities for 2021-2025 identified in the mid-term review of the national drugs strategy (to be published shortly).

The Department of Health has published a factsheet on new funding provided for in Budget 2022 which can be found at www.gov.ie/en/publication/001fc-budget-2022-factsheet/.

I am committed to increasing access to and provision of drug and alcohol services in line with the strategic priorities for 2021-2025 under national drug strategy.

Vaccination Programme

263. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Health if the roll out of the HPV vaccine will be extended to all current male secondary school students; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51541/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The immunisation programme in Ireland is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The committee’s recommendations are based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international best practice in relation to immunisation.

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 HIQA report published in December 2018 did not recommend an HPV catch-up programme for older boys for the following reasons:

- vaccinating boys in the first year of secondary school provides the best possible protection against HPV infection;

- boys are already benefitting from the indirect herd protection provided by the girls' HPV vaccination programme which started in 2010.

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.

Disability Services

264. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when approved respite will be offered to a person (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51542/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Appointments Status

265. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will receive an orthopaedic outpatient appointment at Letterkenny University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51560/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Appointments Status

266. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide an update on the case of a person (details supplied); when an appointment will be scheduled for orthopaedic surgery at the Midland Regional Hospital, Tullamore, County Offaly. [51569/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Staff

267. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Health if provisions have been made to ensure the staffing levels of Portrane Mental Health Hospital will be in place to accomplish full capacity in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51574/21]

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.

Care Services

268. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health the reason a person (details supplied) is waiting so long for HSE funding for long-term care; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51580/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy's question relates to a service matter, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Healthcare Policy

269. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the measures taken by his Department to support and expand clinical trials in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51597/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In May of this year, I established national research ethics committees (NRECs) in the areas of clinical trials of medicines and clinical investigations of medical devices, as part of an ongoing revision of the framework for ethics review of health research in Ireland. These new committees, supported by the National Office for Research Ethics Committees, represent a major step forward in Irish health research, and will play a key role in enabling Ireland to meet its obligations under the new EU Clinical Trials Regulation and the EU Medical Device Regulation.

The Health Research Board (HRB) recently announced €22 million in funding to further develop patient-focused clinical research infrastructure in Ireland. This funding will keep Ireland at the forefront of clinical research and trials and increase opportunities for patients to partici-

pate in and benefit from them. It also increases the supports available to investigators to pursue more investigator-led clinical trials, with HRB support expanding from three Clinical Research Facilities/Centres (CRF/Cs) to five.

Located at hospital sites and supported by universities, CRF/Cs are a key part of the national clinical trials infrastructure and are a huge asset for researchers, clinicians and industry partners wishing to undertake clinical trials. They provide the space, facilities, governance, services and supports, and, most importantly, the skills and expertise necessary to enable high-quality, safe, and compliant clinical trials.

Healthcare Policy

270. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Health if an update will be provided on the implementation of the new model of care for obesity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51598/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Mental Health Services

271. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health the details of the commitment in Budget 2022 to provide two CAMHS hubs. [51599/21]

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.

Budget 2022

272. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health the details of the commitment in Budget 2022 to deliver enhancements in the areas of homecare packages and community beds; if he will define the term enhancements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51600/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): Budget 2021 and the subsequent Health Service Executive National Service Plan allowed for an unprecedented increase in investment in home care and intermediate care to be delivered in the community. This high level of investment is being maintained into 2022. Details of how this will be delivered in 2022, including the additional 5 million home support hours provided for in Budget 2021, to be maintained in 2022, will be finalised as part of the National Service Plan process. In addition

the proportion of hours ringfenced for people with dementia will more than double, from 5% in 2021 to 11% in 2022.

Furthermore, Budget 2022 has provided for €30m in new developments or enhancements for services for older people. These are primarily focused towards improvements in dementia service provision and the ongoing implementation of the recommendations of the COVID-19

Nursing Homes Expert Panel.

Ambulance Service

273. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health his plans for capacity planning and reform within the National Ambulance Service. [51601/21]

274. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health the average response time of ambulances in the south-east area; the number of ambulances ordinarily based at each location; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51602/21]

275. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health the average response time of ambulances in the mid-west area; the number of ambulances ordinarily based at each location; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51603/21]

276. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of paramedics assigned to ambulance services in the south-east area; and the optimum number of paramedics that should serve that area. [51604/21]

277. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of paramedics assigned to ambulance services in the mid-west area; and the optimum number of paramedics that should serve that area. [51605/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 273, 274, 275, 276 and 277 together.

As these are service matters I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Question No. 274 answered with Question No. 273.

Question No. 275 answered with Question No. 273.

Question No. 276 answered with Question No. 273.

Question No. 277 answered with Question No. 273.

Public Procurement Contracts

278. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health if e-tenders for the supply of (details supplied) will be issued following the suspension due to the Covid-19 pandemic; if so, the expected timeframe for the reopening of the e-tender; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51617/21]

279. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the expected timeframe in which (details supplied) will be open again through e-tender for competition; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51618/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 278 and 279 together.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Question No. 279 answered with Question No. 278.

Home Help Service

280. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the status of the new statutory scheme on home support providing an update on each of the four CHO sites that are due to test the reformed model of service delivery; if services will be fully operational under the pilot on 1 November 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51619/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): Enabling people with care-needs to continue to live independently at home for as long as possible is a priority for the Government. To advance this, the Government is committed to establishing a new, statutory scheme for the financing and regulation of home-support services, which the Department of Health is currently developing. 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.

Work is on-going within the Department to progress the development of the new scheme within the broader context of the Sláintecare reforms. This work encompasses the development of the regulatory framework for the new scheme; the examination of the options for the financing model for the scheme; and the development of a reformed model of service-delivery.

With the aim of ensuring that all service-users are provided with a standard, high-quality level of care which is safe, effective, and person-centred, it is envisaged that the regulatory framework will comprise (i) primary legislation for the licensing of public and private home support providers; (ii) minimum requirements (regulations); and HIQA National Standards for Home Support Services.

Earlier this year, Government gave approval to draft a General Scheme and Heads of a Bill to establish a licensing framework for home support providers. This is being progressed by the Department with a view to bringing it through the Houses of the Oireachtas at the earliest opportunity. It is expected that the primary legislation will give the Minister for Health the power to make regulations in respect of minimum requirements which will form the criteria against which a provider's eligibility to hold a licence will be determined. The Department recently commenced a targeted stakeholder consultation on these draft minimum requirements. In addition, HIQA recently ran a public scoping consultation to inform the development of their National Standards for Home Support Services.

In parallel to this, work is ongoing in relation to the development of a reformed model of service delivery for home support. Within this context, funding was secured in 2021 for the HSE to progress the roll-out of interRAI as the standard assessment tool for care-needs in the community; the pilot of a reformed model of service-delivery for home-support; and the establishment of a National Office for Home Support Services.

The testing of the reformed model of service delivery for home support is scheduled to commence in November 2021 in CHO 8 (Longford / West Meath). Recruitment issues associated with backfilling of posts has impacted on release of interRAI Care Coordinators in CHO 2 (Galway), 4 (South Lee) and 7 (Dublin West). This has necessitated phased introduction of pilot sites however it is expected that all will be fully operational by January 2022. A comprehensive and robust operational model for the roll-out of the interRAI has been developed which will facilitate effective, efficient, fair and transparent care needs assessment and planning and appropriate service delivery. The interRAI outputs and pilot site evaluation will be critical to inform legislative and funding decisions in relation to the statutory home support scheme.

130 posts have been funded for the national rollout of the interRAI Ireland system as the standard assessment tool for care-needs and recruitment for these posts is scheduled to commence in this quarter. In addition, a National Home Support Office will be established before the end of the year.

The Sláintecare Implementation Strategy and Action Plan 2021–2023 commits to the advancement of the development of the new home-support scheme in 2021 and to the commencement of its implementation in 2022. While the new home-support scheme is under development, the Government is prioritising improving access to home-support services. As part of Budget 2021, funding for an additional 5 million hours of home-support was provided. This additional allocation will be maintained in 2022. This increased investment will contribute to meeting the Programme for Government commitment to providing equitable access to home-support services. Data which has been provided since the cyber-attack is provisional and subject to change. At the end of August 2021, the preliminary data indicates that about 13.2 million home support hours had been provided to 53,905 people. This is about 2 million more hours compared to the same period last year.

Home Care Packages

281. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the expected timeframe in which the strategic workforce advisory group considering the challenges to homecare will report with recommendations regarding the ongoing difficulties with the recruitment and retention of homecare staff; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51620/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Department is committed to examining the staffing issues experienced by homecare services together with the involvement of key stakeholders including representatives from the homecare sector and across relevant Government departments and agencies. It is intended to provide a forum for practical action and collaboration aimed at identifying the issues that are leading to shortages in the sector.

The Department will bring forward proposals on the scope and potential timeframe for this work as a matter of priority.

Home Care Packages

282. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the number of posts through (details supplied) that will be provided to CH08; the expected timeframe for the recruitment for these posts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51621/21]

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

283. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health if he will detail the incentives and alternatives being considered to attract more workers into homecare; and the engagements he has had on the issue with various other departments. [51622/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The Department has committed to establishing a cross departmental Strategic Workforce Advisory Group. The

role of the group will be to facilitate the views of stakeholders, and examine the evidence regarding the skills and labour market shortage, in home support and nursing homes. Potential areas to be considered include recruitment, retention, skills development, and the sustainable employment of home carers into the future. The Department is working to scope and plan for the establishment of this group. It is envisaged that it will include representatives from the home support sector and across relevant Government departments and agencies. It is intended to provide a forum for practical action and collaboration aimed at identifying the issues that are leading to shortages in the sector.

Home Care Packages

284. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons per CHO in tabular form from the establishment of the scheme who have availed of HSE funding to hire homecare support providers themselves; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51623/21]

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 Staff

285. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51639/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Services

286. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if a person (details supplied) can get a bed in Kenmare Community Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51643/21]

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.

Disability Services

287. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the number of children affected by delays and cuts in the children's disability network teams in each Dublin postal district; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51673/21]

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.

Budget 2022

288. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Minister for Health the legal rationale underpinning the age limit of 17 to 25 years of age for those accessing free contraception as set out in the €31 million women's health package in Budget 2022;; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51700/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): *The Programme for Government* commits to providing free contraception for women, starting with the 17-25 age cohort; accordingly, funding for free contraception, starting with women aged 17-25, has been allocated in 2022.

The scheme will provide for:

- The cost of prescription contraception
- The cost of fitting and/or removal of various types of long-acting reversible contraception and administration of contraceptive injections plus any necessary checks, by medical professionals certified to fit/remove same;
- The cost of training and certifying additional medical professionals to fit and remove long-acting reversible contraception;
- The cost of a maximum of two consultations per annum with GPs and other doctors to discuss forms of contraception suitable for individual patients and to enable prescription of same.
- Training and certification of additional GPs to fit long-acting reversible contraception

It is envisaged that a wide range of contraceptive options, currently available to medical card holders, will be made available through this scheme. This includes contraceptive injections, implants, various types of intrauterine system (IUS) or device (IUD; commonly known as the coil), the contraceptive patch and ring, and various forms of oral contraceptive pill.

As noted by the Report of the Working Group on Contraception, which is available on my Department's website, the justifications for the phased and incremental introduction of free contraception are based on the differential barriers faced in accessing the most effective forms of contraception by different age cohorts, and likely supply-side constraints.

The initiative is gradually being introduced by age cohort, starting with younger women who are least likely to be financially independent and where cost has been shown to be a greater barrier to accessing the most effective forms of contraception, long acting, reversible contraception, or LARCs.

The Report advises that an issue highlighted by both the research review, and by many stakeholders, is a possible lack of capacity to deliver some forms of contraception. Many forms of LARC require specialised certification and training in terms of fitting and removal. The costs of prescription contraception medications and/or medical devices are currently covered under the GMS scheme, for those holding a medical card, while clinical costs are covered under both the medical and GP visit cards.

However, for private patients, the up-front costs of various LARCs were estimated by the Report at €250 - €350 in 2018-2019; with the majority of stakeholders reporting this as a barrier to access, particularly for younger women. The removal of cost barriers is almost certainly going to increase demand for these services.

In developing the scheme, this has been taken into account and funding has been provided in Budget 2022 for training and certification of additional GPs to fit LARCs,. However, this upskilling is likely to take time, hence the adoption of a phased approach to implementation, as outlined in the Programme for Government.

Providing free contraception to the age cohort of 17-24 year old women was one of the recommended options in the Report. This was extended to 17-25 in the Program for Government and this is the rationale for the initial rollout announced in Budget 2022.

Hospital Services

289. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51701/21]

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.

Departmental Contracts

290. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he or any official from his Department has held meetings or conducted correspondence with a company (details supplied) from 1 January 2017 to date; if his Department has engaged the services of the company for any purposes from 1 January 2017 to date; if so, the nature of such services and the costs incurred; if a tender process was conducted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51348/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I wish to advise the Deputy that neither myself nor officials from my Department held meetings or conducted correspondence with a company (details supplied) from 1 January 2017 to date, nor did my Department engage the services of the company for any purpose during the years in question.

Forestry Sector

291. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the afforestation scheme is classed as an environmental scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51397/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Forestry Programme 2014-2020 (extended to end 2022) provides significant supports for afforestation scheme which contains measures aimed at protecting the environment and biodiversity.

All forestry licences issued must comply with the requirements of EU and national environmental law, environmental policy that falls within the scope of EU law, and the four environmental principles that inform those frameworks.

Although not an exclusive list this includes the Birds Directive, the Habitats Directive, the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive, the Water Framework Directive, and the Dangerous Substances Directive, as well as the prevention principle.

This aims to prevent environmental damage rather than to react to it; and the rectification at source principle, which seeks to prevent pollution at its source rather than remedy its effects.

The Department's Land Types for Afforestation procedure (2017) and Environmental Requirements for Afforestation (2016) are significant in this regard, as together they exclude a wide range of sensitive sites and habitats (including non-designated Annex I habitats) from afforestation, and stipulate measures to include existing habitats and undisturbed setback on sites which are deemed eligible.

Forestry Sector

292. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the meetings the Minister of State with responsibility for Land Use and Biodiversity had with banks in relation to forestry contractors; the banks they met with; the dates these meetings took place on; the outcomes of these meetings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51398/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I can confirm that both myself and Minister of State Pippa Hackett have held meetings with bank officials in relation to forestry.

Minister Hackett met with officials from Bank of Ireland, Ulster Bank and AIB in September 2020 and discussed, inter alia, cashflow for operators within the forestry sector.

I met with the CEO of AIB in October 2020 and the CEOs of Bank of Ireland and Ulster Bank in November 2020. I raised the issue of temporary liquidity difficulties in the forestry sector and asked that credit demand from forestry contractors be examined in the context of the situation regarding licensing.

The Irish forestry sector is a significant employer in rural Ireland of almost 12,000 jobs. I and Minister Hackett, who has overall responsibility for the sector, remain committed to supporting the sector and to addressing licensing issues.

We have a framework in place through Project Woodland to deal with the backlog of licences and we have invested significant time and resources in doing so. This is producing results, with 585 licences issued in September, the highest in any month since April 2019. We will continue to work on sustaining licence output for the benefit of all involved in the sector.

Forestry Sector

293. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if applications submitted to the Forest Service are dealt with sequentially going by the TFL number allocated to each individual application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51399/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department assesses all forestry licence and scheme applications on their own merits and in combination with other plans and projects in the area. The Deputy is aware of the backlog of forestry licences awaiting assessment and that the majority of these are referred to ecology.

Circular 08/2021 published last June, set out the work the Department had conducted to streamline the licence assessment process. The Circular detailed the improvements had been

made to the system, to optimise the ecologists' time to concentrate on the ecological aspects of each application. At the time of the Circular, the improvements that had been applied to private tree felling licence (TFL) applications with ecologists working mostly on these files in advance of the system being developed further to assist with forest road works and afforestation licence applications.

In relation to the tree felling licence applications on hand, the Department undertook a triage exercise to determine the quality of the supporting documentation submitted. Resulting from this, a cohort of applications were deemed to be complete enough to enable the ecological assessment. The remaining cases were communicated to the applicants or their registered foresters, detailing the issues involved.

Since then, the Department has been working through those complete applications and those for which the requested information has been received. Ecologists are assigned applications on a county basis and within those they prioritise, taking the older applications first. It may also be the case that two or more applications proximate to each other are assessed together, regardless of when they were received to ensure consistency.

I am pleased to report that this has been a very successful exercise and that we are now issuing an average of 115 new licences per week since the beginning of September.

Forestry Sector

294. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of bilateral meetings he or his senior staff have had with the forestry industry in the past three to six months in connection to the CAP strategic plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51400/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): A consultation on the draft interventions of the CAP Strategic Plan which was conducted in August and September this year has been met with a lot of interest and the Department has received many submissions in response which are currently being examined.

Forest Industries Ireland (FII) made a submission containing proposals on the further integration of tree and forest planting initiatives.

Bilateral meetings between the Department and FII have taken place on 17th May 2022 and 2nd September 2022 respectively. FII have followed-up on their submission with further detailed queries which are currently being considered by Department officials.

The Department also presented to the COFORD Council on the same issues last week, as well of course as ongoing engagement with the CAP Consultative Committee.

As outlined in the draft interventions that have been published by the Department, several tree planting measures have been proposed to be included in the CAP Strategic Plan. Due to the long-term nature of forestry, it is not proposed to include forest planting measures in the new CAP measures, but a separate Forestry Programme which will be the successor of the current Forestry Programme 2014-2020 (extended to end 2022) will be developed.

The planting of trees has the potential to play a significant part in our environmental priorities especially water quality, biodiversity and climate.

I remain committed to integration between the new Forest Strategy and the next CSP to

ensure that measures in both will complement each other and lead to increased levels of tree planting.

Forestry Sector

295. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the percentage of forestry licence applications which are screened by his Department for appropriate assessments in the past 12 months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51401/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Deputy will be aware of certain Court of Justice of the European Union decisions and their subsequent application in the High Court and other appeals bodies, pertaining to the environmental assessment of planning applications.

Forestry licences, that is afforestation, forest road works, aerial fertilisation and tree felling licences are considered planning applications. Therefore, the Department reflected on the CJEU decisions, which resulted in a change to the way forestry licence applications are assessed.

Prior to the decisions, mitigations could be included in the application. However, this is not now possible, which means many more applications are screened in for a comprehensive ecological assessment and approximately 80% of all forestry licences are now referred to our Ecology Unit. We now have 26 ecologists, whereas at the time of the CJEU decision we had one.

Departmental Staff

296. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the management structure and reporting lines or line managers of the Forest Service of his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51403/21]

297. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the productivity of each of the inspectors and their line managers in the Forest Service in each of the years 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51404/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 296 and 297 together.

There are three Divisions within the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine dealing with forestry matters – Forestry Policy Division, Forestry Inspectorate Division and Forest Sector Development Division.

The first is led by a Principal Officer and the other two are led by Senior Inspectors. The three divisions report to the Assistant Secretary General with responsibility for forestry. Within this structure on the administrative side, there are Assistant Principal Officers, Higher Executive Officers, Executive Officers and Clerical Officers. On the inspectorate and forest sector development side, there are Grade 1, 2 and 3 Forestry Inspectors as well as some administrative staff.

The performance of all DAFM staff is managed through a Performance Management Development System. Inspectors are involved in a range of activities, many of which involve interdependencies with other colleagues. They are, for instance, involved in payment and licensing

applications, inspections, alleged illegal felling, appeals, policy and environmental matters, forestry support schemes and forest health. This means that productivity cannot be conveyed by any one metric.

Question No. 297 answered with Question No. 296.

Departmental Circulars

298. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the date the attention of the Forest Service section of his Department was drawn to SI No. 293 of 2021, the details and implications of which were outlined through circular 10 of 2021 on 7 July 2021; if his officials were involved or consulted with before this statutory instrument became law; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51405/21]

299. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if staff from the Forest Service division of his Department were aware of SI No. 293 of 2021 before issuing circular 8 of 2021 which was issued on 17 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51406/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 298 and 299 together.

The European Union (Birds and Natural Habitats) (Amendment) Regulations, 2021, (S.I. No. 293 of 2021) were signed on 21st June, 2021 by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. My Department was made aware of it later that week by that Department.

These Regulations were signed after Circular 8/2021 issued. However, the contents of that Circular are unaffected by the SI.

Question No. 299 answered with Question No. 298.

Greyhound Industry

300. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if there is a requirement for a veterinarian to be present at all greyhound racetracks when greyhound trials are taking place; if there is a requirement for all greyhound trials to be recorded or if unofficial greyhound trials take place at greyhound stadiums that are not registered; the number of injured greyhounds recorded in the past 12 months at greyhound trials; and the reporting mechanism that is in place to document all injuries sustained by greyhounds at greyhound trials. [51441/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Rásaíocht Con Éireann (RCÉ) is a commercial state body, established under the Greyhound Industry Act, 1958 chiefly to control greyhound racing and to improve and develop the greyhound industry. RCÉ is a body corporate and a separate legal entity to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

The question raised by the Deputy is an operational matter for RCÉ and, therefore, the question has been referred to the body for direct reply.

Legislative Measures

301. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his attention has been drawn to a request from a person (details supplied) to extend the scope of the Animal Health and Welfare (Amendment and Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51442/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Programme for Government 2020 contains a commitment regarding the prohibition of fur farming and Department officials have been working on appropriate steps to give effect to this. The draft general scheme of the Prohibition on Fur Farming 2021 legislation was approved by Government at its meeting on 18th June 2021.

The primary focus of the Bill is to make it illegal for any new fur farms to be established and will provide for the closure of the small number of existing farm operations. I expect to be in a position to bring the Bill before the Oireachtas in the very near future.

Veterinary Services

302. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to ensure that farmers have adequate access to veterinary services and competitively priced veterinary medicinal products. [51447/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): All current suppliers of veterinary medicines will continue to be legally permitted to supply medicines post-January 2022.

The Department is actively working with all stakeholders to sustain a competitive market for the supply of these products.

The ambition is to ensure Irish farmers are empowered to purchase medicines from their supplier of choice. Initiatives such as the development of a National Veterinary Prescribing System (NVPS) will help deliver on this ambition. The NVPS will result in a prescription being made available to a farmer by choice of email or text. Farmers can then engage with Licensed Merchants, veterinary pharmacists or their veterinary practitioner in getting their prescription dispensed.

I also intend to allow for generic/alternative veterinary medicines be dispensed based on the active substances on the prescription, further reducing costs for farmers and suppliers of veterinary medicines alike.

There are currently 775 registered veterinary practices in Ireland and 3,168 veterinary practitioners and 1,160 veterinary nurses.

The Department carried out research and analysis into the distribution and accessibility to farmers of large-animal veterinary services in rural Ireland. This analysis suggests large-animal veterinary services are available within 20km of over 95% of Irish farms. The Department will continue to monitor this position closely to ensure Irish farmers are adequately supported with the provision of veterinary services in the best interests of animal health and welfare.

Common Agricultural Policy

303. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will ensure that supports to a cohort of persons (details supplied) are included in the next CAP.

[51448/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Programme for Government ‘*Our Shared Future*’ contains a commitment to seek to resolve the issue of support for the category of farmers known as Forgotten Farmers.

The Department is examining options to address the issue of forgotten farmers.

The outline of any schemes supported under the next CAP and details of the Terms and Conditions for eligibility under such schemes, or for other supports available, will be set out once all the relevant EU Regulations are agreed and finalised.

Common Agricultural Policy

304. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to continue the process of convergence in 2022. [51449/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Convergence is a mandatory provision in the current Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Programme and a provision that will be continued in the new CAP.

The Regulation regarding the transition period permitted EU Member States to continue convergence during the transition period, should they wish to do so. Ireland took the decision to pause convergence during this time. This option was chosen to provide some much-needed stability in direct payments and to allow time to consult with farmers and their representative bodies to ascertain their views and expectations.

The Department and I continue to consult with stakeholders to further consider how to continue the convergence process along with considering their views on various other elements of the new CAP. These consultations will serve to ensure concerns and recommendations by farmers and their representative bodies are incorporated into the development of the CAP Strategic Plan.

Common Agricultural Policy

305. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the proposals he plans to bring forward to support young farmers as part of the state CAP Strategic Plan. [51450/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Details of the CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 are still in consultation with stakeholders.

However, with regard to direct payment supports, the Department proposes to operate a National Reserve from 2023 to prioritise access to payment entitlements for young farmers and new farmers. This

would provide successful applicants with an allocation of payment entitlements on eligible land on which they hold no entitlements and/or a top up to the national average entitlement value on existing entitlements they hold where these entitlements have a value below the national average entitlement value.

The Department also proposes to operate the Complementary Income Support for Young

Farmers from 2023, which will build on the success of the Young Farmers Scheme that has been in place since 2015. This would provide successful applicants with a payment per eligible hectare, subject to a maximum of 50 hectares, for a maximum term of five years.

There is also provision to allow Young Farmers Scheme participants who have not reached the end of their term of eligibility under the scheme to roll over into the Complementary Income Support for Young Farmers for the remainder of their 5-year term of eligibility.

With regard to supports for young farmers under Pillar II of the new CAP, the proposed new On-Farm Investment Scheme will address key environmental objectives through the provision of grant aid for new capital investments that contribute to environmental, farm safety or animal health and welfare objectives. It is proposed that a higher rate of grant aid would be available to qualified Young Farmers.

Budget 2022

306. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason there was no new support measures provided to suckler beef farmers in Budget 2022. [51451/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I am pleased to have secured over €1.8 billion of funding for the Department in Budget 2022 for the overall sector. This is in addition to almost €1.2 billion in EU funded direct payments received annually to support farm incomes and reward good agricultural and environmental practices.

Farmers can have confidence that this budget protects farm family income and supports action to improve safety and sustainability on farms. I have succeeded in maintaining all of the crucial farm schemes and the budget provision will also allow us to provide additional funding for a number of policy priorities.

More than €100 million will be provided in targeted supports for the beef and sheep sectors including BDGP, BEEP-S, Sheep Welfare Scheme and Dairy Calf Programme.

Other relevant measures include:

- €4m for the establishment of the Office of the Food Ombudsman
- €80m for on farm investments through TAMS including specific supports for solar energy installation
- A tax package that protects the stamp duty relief for young, trained farmers, and stock relief.
- An additional €2m to support farm safety initiatives

Within the 2022 provision some €872 million allows key Rural Development Programme and forestry supports to remain available through the transitional period between the two CAP programmes. This provides the budget to extend, or rollover, existing RDP schemes from 2021 including the ANC at €250m and also the BDGP and Sheep Welfare Scheme which I have already referenced. These schemes are vital income supports for farmers and provide a measurable public good.

I have worked closely with my colleague Minister McGrath to finalise a financial package for the new CAP that will support the agri -food sector and rural communities in the period from

2023 to 2027

In a time of transition, farmers can have confidence that this budget protects farm family income and supports action to improve safety and sustainability on farms.

Budget 2022

307. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason there was no new support measures provided to sheep farmers in Budget 2022. [51452/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I am pleased to have delivered over €1.8 billion of funding in Budget 2022 for the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine for the overall sector. This is in addition to almost €1.2 billion in EU-funded direct payments received annually to support farm incomes and reward good agricultural and environmental practices

More than €100 million of this will be in targeted supports for the beef and sheep sectors including BDGP, BEEP-S, Sheep Welfare Scheme and Dairy Calf Programme

Other relevant measures include:

- €4m for the establishment of the Office of the Food Ombudsman
- €80m for on farm investments through TAMS including specific supports for solar energy installation
- A tax package that protects the stamp duty relief for young, trained farmers, and stock relief.
- An additional €2m to support farm safety initiatives

Specifically, in relation to the Sheep sector, 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.

Currently, I am working closely with my colleague Minister McGrath to finalise a financial package for the new CAP that will support the Agri -food sector and rural communities, including the sheep sector, in the period from 2023 to 2028. I hope to make a further announcement with regard to this shortly.

Budget 2022

308. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason there was no new support measures provided to farmers with land in areas of natural constraint in Budget 2022. [51453/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In a time of transition, farmers can have confidence that Budget 2022 protects farm families, farm profitability as well as safety and sustainability on farms, This is the second year of transition between the old CAP and the new. My key priority has been to provide confidence to farmers and their families that their payments would be protected during the transition period. We have

succeeded in maintaining all of the crucial farm schemes and the budget provision will also allow us to provide additional funding for a number of policy priorities

Budget 2022 provides a gross Vote of €1.858 billion for the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Within the 2022 provision, some €872 million allows key Rural Development Programme and forestry supports to remain available through the transitional period between the two CAP programmes. This provides the budget to extend, or rollover, existing RDP schemes from 2021, including the ANC Scheme (€250m).

These schemes are vital income supports for farmers and provide a measurable public good. The current co-financing rate will remain for RDP measures during the CAP transition period.

Common Agricultural Policy

309. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the redistributive measures he is proposing in the CAP Strategic Plan; and if he will bring this plan before the Houses of the Oireachtas for approval. [51454/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The political agreement on the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy strikes the right balance in seeking to ensure a fair distribution of payments between farmers while also supporting the agriculture sector to achieve a higher level of environmental and climate ambition.

Significant flexibility is given to Member States to achieve this, in accordance with their own national circumstances. This flexibility was one of my key objectives in the negotiations, and I am pleased that it was secured.

Specifically on the targeting and distribution of payments, the agreement provides for voluntary capping of direct payments at €100,000, with Member States also free to reduce payments above €60,000 by up to 85%.

Internal convergence of payments will continue, with each entitlement value to reach a minimum of 85% of the national average value by 2026.

And a mandatory redistribution of 10% of direct payments funding to small and medium sized farmers is also provided for, but with a derogation for Member States where they can demonstrate that their redistribution needs can be satisfied by other measures in Pillar I.

I have been consulting widely with farmers in recent months on how we can best apply this flexibility to address these issues at national level, including through the national CAP Stakeholder Consultative Committee, through a countrywide series of mart meetings, and through a formal public consultation exercise which attracted more than 1,000 submissions. I and my officials have also discussed the CAP with the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine on a number of occasions.

I will take the outcome of these consultations into consideration before seeking the approval of Government and submitting Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 to the European Commission by the deadline of 1st January 2022.

Budget 2022

310. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the level of funding that will be made available to the agri-environmental scheme and agri-environmental measures in Budget 2022. [51455/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In a time of transition, farmers can have confidence that this budget protects farm families, farm profitability as well as safety and sustainability on farms, This is the second year of transition between the old CAP and the new. My key priority is to provide confidence to farmers and their families that their payments would be protected during the transition period. We have succeeded in maintaining all of the crucial farm schemes and the budget provision will also allow us to provide additional funding for a number of policy priorities

Budget 2022 provides a gross Vote of €1.858 billion for the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Within the 2022 provision some €872 million allows key Rural Development Programme and Forestry supports to remain available through the transitional period between the two CAP programmes. This provides the budget to extend, or rollover, existing RDP schemes from 2021 including:

- More than €100 million in targeted supports for the beef and sheep sectors including BDGP, BEEP-S, Sheep Welfare Scheme and Dairy Calf Programme

- €80 million for on farm investments through TAMS including specific supports for solar energy installation

- €214 million for GLAS & REAP

- €14.6 million for Locally Led Agri-Environment Scheme

- €100 million for Forestry

These schemes are vital income supports for farmers and provide a measurable public good.

The current co-financing rate will remain for RDP measures during the CAP transition period.

The definitive allocations will be set out in the 2022 Revised Estimates Volume (REV) which will be published later this year.

Trade Agreements

311. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the actions he has taken at EU level to ensure that additional beef imports which would depress beef prices do not enter the single market. [51456/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In the context of EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations, the question of market access for agricultural goods, including beef, is often one of the most difficult issues to resolve. The Department and I are therefore very active in ensuring that any market access provisions included in these FTA negotiations are balanced, and that they take into account all potential impacts on Irish and EU producers.

I take every opportunity to raise concerns and priorities for the Irish agri-food sector in EU

FTA negotiations at EU Agriculture Council of Minister meetings. The Department also plays an active role in developing Ireland's contribution to EU discussions on FTA negotiations, including at the EU Trade Policy Committee.

In situations where the EU is proposing to increase EU market access for agri-food products, including for beef, we use our influence to minimise the quantity of tariff rate quotas provided for. We also seek additional conditionality or segmentation to apply to these TRQs, for example through:

- splitting beef TRQs into separate frozen and fresh categories;
- maintaining in-quota tariffs;
- extending phase-in periods.

I also continue to impress on the European Commission the fact that full account must be taken of its own recently updated assessment on the cumulative impact of trade deals on the agri-food sector. This includes the potentially very damaging impact of Brexit on an already delicately balanced EU beef market.

With regard to on-going and future EU trade negotiations, I will continue to insist that appropriate safeguards which protect the interests of the Irish and European beef sector are included in the final agreements.

Agriculture Industry

312. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans for the future of the Beef Market Taskforce; and the consideration he has given to extending its remit in order to secure a fair price for beef farmers. [51457/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Beef Taskforce was established on foot of the beef sector agreement of 15th September 2019. The Beef Taskforce's remit as set out in terms of reference was to monitor the implementation of the actions arising from that agreement.

The Taskforce was to meet at least quarterly from October 2019 for a period of one year after which the Taskforce's progress was to be reviewed. However, progress was delayed in 2020 due to COVID-19.

As the Deputy may be aware, I requested the independent Chair of the Beef Taskforce, Mr Michael Dowling, to provide a report to me on the progress to date of the Taskforce, which he has done. I will complete my analysis of the final report, after which I will make the necessary decision on future strategic engagement with the Sector.

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

It should be noted that the Taskforce was set up in response to the issues that prevailed in the sector in the late summer of 2019 and had very specific actions to address. It is conceivable that it may not be the most suitable vehicle for addressing those that exist in 2021 and beyond. I will make a decision on this shortly.

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

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

I am committed to progressing work in this area in order to bring much-needed transparency to the sector.

Common Agricultural Policy

313. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the proposals he plans to bring forward to increase the number of recognised female farmers as part of the CAP Strategic Plan. [51458/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In addition, the recently published Food Vision 2030 recognises the important contribution of women to the long-term sustainability of the agri-food sector, and includes actions to promote and improve gender balance at all levels, including at senior management and board level. It is available via the following link gov.ie - Food Vision 2030 – A World Leader in Sustainable Food Systems (www.gov.ie)

Horticulture Sector

314. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of the findings of the working group established by his Department to examine the peat supply issue to the horticultural sector in the wake of the peat harvesting cessation on Bord na Móna bogs; the way in which he plans to deal with this issue in the short-term to protect those involved in the horticultural trade; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51483/21]

315. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the measures he will introduce as a matter of urgency to ensure that there is an adequate supply of domestic peat for the mushroom and horticulture sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51484/21]

316. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if it will be ensured that the concerns of the mushroom and horticulture sector in relation to the harvesting of horticultural peat are addressed in view of the importance of peat for that sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51486/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 314, 315 and 316 together.

As the Deputy may be aware, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has no involvement in the regulation of peat extraction. Nevertheless, I am very well aware of the

concerns in relation to the licensing of peat extraction which are generating challenges (volume and price) for the horticulture sector.

Malcolm Noonan T.D., Minister for Heritage and Electoral Reform in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, established a working group, which includes a representative from my Department, to address the key issues raised in a Report on the Review of the use of Peat Moss in the Horticultural Industry. A final report from this working group is expected imminently.

Separately, my Department is actively looking at alternatives to peat and has funded two research projects to date. Furthermore, the Department's Research Call for 2021 included a call for further research on alternatives to peat based growing media for horticultural production.

Given the Department's areas of responsibility and recognising the importance of the horticulture sector to the economy, my Department continues to provide sustained and significant support to the sector through the Scheme of Investment Aid for the Development of the Horticulture Sector.

Additionally, fruit and vegetable growers who are members of recognised Producer Organisations (POs) can access EU funding up to 50% of the eligible costs of approved Operational Programmes through the EU's PO scheme.

I continue to engage directly with the sector, most recently meeting with the mushroom industry on the issues they face. Minister of State Pippa Hackett, who has responsibility for the sector, has ongoing engagement directly with the horticulture sector, and has responsibility for the sector, including in her capacity as co-chair of the Horticulture Industry Forum, across a range of issues, including peat use.

Question No. 315 answered with Question No. 314.

Question No. 316 answered with Question No. 314.

Greyhound Industry

317. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of greyhounds injured and killed at Irish greyhound tracks during races, official trials, unofficial trials and sales trials in each of the years 2000 to 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51509/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Rásaíocht Con Éireann (RCÉ) is a commercial state body, established under the Greyhound Industry Act, 1958 chiefly to control greyhound racing and to improve and develop the greyhound industry. RCÉ is a body corporate and a separate legal entity to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

The question raised by the Deputy is an operational matter for RCÉ and, therefore, the question has been referred to the body for direct reply.

Greyhound Industry

318. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of greyhound litters born in each of the years 2000 to 2020; and if he will make a state-

ment on the matter. [51510/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Irish Coursing Club is the organisation charged by statute since 1923 with the role of Keeper of the Irish Stud Book. The stud book records pedigrees, ownerships, breeding data and transfers of ownership primarily. The Irish Coursing Club is subject to the general control and direction of Rásaíocht Con Éireann.

Data provided by the Irish Coursing Club indicate the following number of litters born from 2000 – 2020.

Year	Litters
2000	3,781
2001	3,867
2002	4,565
2003	4,611
2004	4,228
2005	4,366
2006	4,318
2007	4,038
2008	3,819
2009	3,165
2010	3,003
2011	3,272
2012	2,980
2013	2,736
2014	2,801
2015	2,709
2016	2,520
2017	2,441
2018	2,344
2019	2,324
2020	1,962

Greyhound Industry

319. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of greyhounds homed privately by trainers, breeders and or owners separate to the Irish Retired Greyhound Trust from January 2020 to date in 2021; if all such greyhounds are neutered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51518/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Rásaíocht Con Éireann (RCÉ) is a commercial state body, established under the Greyhound Industry Act, 1958 chiefly to control greyhound racing and to improve and develop the greyhound industry. RCÉ is a body corporate and a separate legal entity to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

The question raised by the Deputy is an operational matter for RCÉ and, therefore, the question has been referred to the body for direct reply.

Greyhound Industry

320. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter (details supplied) in relation to a greyhound that sustained injuries while racing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51537/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Rásaíocht Con Éireann (RCÉ) is a commercial state body, established under the Greyhound Industry Act, 1958 chiefly to control greyhound racing and to improve and develop the greyhound industry. RCÉ is a body corporate and a separate legal entity to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

The question raised by the Deputy is an operational matter for RCÉ and, therefore, the question has been referred to the body for direct reply.

Horticulture Sector

321. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the engagements he has had with plant nurseries in relation to the reuse of carbon by LPG generators; the considerations made following these engagements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51615/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I am fully committed to and supportive of the horticulture sector meeting the objectives of a sustainable food system in all its facets and am aware of the use of supplementary CO₂ in protected crops to optimise yield and performance, a practice in place for quite sometime. I along with my colleague Minister of State Pippa Hackett, who has overall responsibility for the sector and my officials have ongoing engagement with the sector.

The Department provides significant supports to development of the horticulture industry and plant production in Ireland through the scheme of Investment aid for the development of the commercial horticulture sector and the EU Producer Organisation Scheme. This included a commitment of €9 million in funding through the recent budget.

Agriculture Industry

322. **Deputy John Paul Phelan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the way in which the Food Vision 2030 target to increase tillage production will be supported; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51626/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The new stakeholder strategy for the Irish agri-food sector, Food Vision 2030, was launched by An Taoiseach Micheál Martin TD, myself and Ministerial colleagues on 3rd August.

The vision of the new Strategy is that Ireland will become a “World Leader in Sustainable Food Systems” over the next decade. Food Vision provides a framework within which more detailed plans and processes on the wide range of issues facing the sector will be progressed and developed, overseen by an implementation committee. Some 200 actions under 22 goals are proposed, guided by four high-level missions:

1. A Climate Smart, Environmentally Sustainable Agri-Food Sector

2. Viable and Resilient Primary Producers with Enhanced Well-Being
3. Food that is safe, nutritious and appealing: trusted and valued at home and abroad
4. An Innovative, Competitive and Resilient Agri-Food Sector, driven by Technology and Talent.

Food Vision states that the tillage and horticulture sectors are the most carbon efficient sectors of Irish agriculture and it is important that the area under cultivation in these sectors is at least retained, with an ambition to increase both.

Although there is no specific target to increase tillage production, Food Vision 2030 acknowledges the importance of the tillage sector as it provides high quality grain to the animal feed industry, and straw for feeding and bedding, while also making a significant contribution to the food and drinks sectors in the form of malting barley, milling wheat and oats for the breakfast cereals industry.

Action 27 in Mission 2 (Viable and Resilient Primary Producers with Enhanced Well-Being) states that Stakeholders will work to develop the sector to take advantage of potential growth in: 1) high value output (malting barley, wheat, oats and rye) to distilling and brewing; 2) high value food markets such as oats (particularly organic oats), oils and salad & chipping potatoes; 3) meeting domestic protein crop demand for livestock diets.

The Department and I will continue to work with the sector and to provide supports as appropriate. The success of Food Vision 2030 will depend on effective implementation and oversight. For this reason, a Monitoring and Implementation Framework is included in the Strategy. This highlights areas for collaboration and partnership within the sector but also with key external stakeholders.

Food Industry

323. **Deputy John Paul Phelan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of the Programme for Government commitment to review the role, structures, and strategic focus of State agencies in the food sector and to ensure that their programme of work is fully aligned with future Government and emerging EU policy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51627/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I work closely with the State Agencies under the Department's remit on an ongoing basis, and there is continuous collaboration across the wide range of our shared responsibilities.

As well as this ongoing liaison, the implementation process for our agri-food strategies provides a more formal opportunity for coordination of our work.

For some twenty years, the Irish agri-food sector has benefited from having a coherent, stakeholder-led vision and strategy to underpin the sector's continued development. These strategies are coordinated and monitored by a High-Level Implementation Committee, which I chair, and which includes the Heads of the relevant State Agencies (Bord Bia, BIM, Enterprise Ireland and Teagasc), as well as representatives from relevant Government Departments.

On the question of a more formal review, it is anticipated that these will be undertaken as part of the periodic critical reviews of the State Agencies.

Departmental Funding

324. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the funding programmes within her Department which are due to reopen for applications following announcements made through Budget 2022; if she will provide details of an appropriate funding stream for organisations (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51338/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): The increased funding allocated to the Department under Budget 2022 will allow it to continue to support communities across Ireland as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The **Community Enhancement Programme** is the funding programme within my Department that is most relevant to the bridge club referenced by the Deputy. It provides small grants to community groups to enhance facilities in disadvantaged areas. Funding is provided to each Local Authority area, and administered by Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs). In May this year I launched the 2021 CEP with an allocation of €4.5m. The key theme was to support groups as they reopen facilities which were closed due to COVID-19. The 2021 CEP is now closed, but it will re-open in due course and further information will be available from the LCDC in each area.

The following two schemes were also specifically referenced by the Deputy.

The **Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme** provides funding to Local Development Companies across Ireland so that they can work with marginalised individuals and the groups that represent them. This programme has secured a 10% or €4m budget increase in 2022, and the current iteration covers the period from 2018 to the end of 2023.

The **Scheme to Support National Organisations (SSNO)** provides multi-annual funding towards core costs of national community and voluntary organisations that demonstrate good governance and deliver services and supports that have a focus on one or more of the following: addressing poverty, social exclusion and promoting equality.

The current three year scheme commenced on 1st July 2019 and will cease on 30th June 2022. A total of €18.8 million has been allocated under the current scheme to a total of 74 organisations. It is expected that a new iteration of the scheme will commence in July 2022, further to an application process commencing in December 2021. Funding for the Scheme to Support National Organisations (SSNO Scheme) will increase from €5.9 million to €6.7 million in 2022.

My Department also has many other schemes, the details of which are available on my Department's website. I would also encourage interested parties, such as the bridge club referenced by the Deputy, to stay in touch with the Local Development Company and Local Authority in their area, so that they are aware of grant schemes from across Government Departments and state agencies, as they become available.

Departmental Contracts

325. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she or any official from her Department has held meetings or conducted correspondence with a company (details supplied) from 1 January 2017 to date; if her Department has engaged the

services of the company for any purposes from 1 January 2017 to date; if so, the nature of such services and the costs incurred; if a tender process was conducted; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51360/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I can confirm to the Deputy that neither I, or my Department officials, have had contact or entered into contracts with the referenced company in the time period in question.

Departmental Policies

326. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when a six month progress report on the implementation of Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025 will be available considering the commitment to providing this as set out in the strategy; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51384/21]

327. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the current status of the actions set out in the Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025 work programme; if her Department will complete all scheduled actions by the end of 2021 as planned; if she will provide an update on each measure listed in the work programme in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51386/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 326 and 327 together.

‘Our Rural Future’ is the Government’s ambitious rural development policy for 2021 to 2025, and was published on 29 March.

It contains over 150 commitments across the whole-of-Government, for both short-term recovery and longer-term economic and social development in rural areas.

The policy has a five-year timeframe, with updates on delivery provided by a series of Progress Reports. Development of annual work programmes allows for the review and revision of priorities contained in the measures for delivery over the lifetime of the policy.

The 2021 Work Programme, which was drafted in conjunction with relevant Departments, contains actions which advance the delivery of more than 80 per cent of commitments in the Policy.

My Department has begun preparations for the publication of the first Progress Report, which will be published at the end of this year in order to incorporate updates on all measures contained in the 2021 Work Programme.

Further Progress Reports will be produced every six months thereafter as per the commitment in the Policy.

While work on compiling the first Progress Report is ongoing, I am delighted with the level of activity across Government in recent months to deliver on the Policy’s ambition. This has seen investment provided for rural communities across a range of areas such as local transport and active travel, remote working facilities and digital connectivity, and huge levels of support for important projects under my Department’s Rural Development Investment Programme.

We have also seen, for example, the launch of the agri-food strategy Food Vision 2030 and the Pathways to Work 2021-2025 Strategy, the publication of the Maritime Area Planning Bill and launch of the National Marine Planning Framework, and the formal establishment of Tech-

nological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest at the start of this month. The revised National Development Plan, published in recent weeks, also significantly reinforces the objectives of Our Rural Future.

Question No. 327 answered with Question No. 326.

Departmental Programmes

328. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development further to Parliamentary Questions No. 36 of 14 October 2021, the expected timeframe for the finalisation of proposals to guide the future direction and work programme of the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce; the groups the engagement has taken place with; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51613/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce is expected to reconvene in the coming weeks. Engagement between officials in my Department and in the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications is ongoing with proposals regarding the membership, structure and specific actions of the reconstituted Taskforce at an advanced stage.

The draft proposals for the reconstituted Taskforce set out an ambitious and impactful work programme. Focussing on actions that will deliver tangible and sustainable improvements in telecoms services for the public, it is intended that the new Taskforce will leverage the excellent progress made by its predecessor. As with the previous work programme, periodic reports on the Taskforce's activities will be disseminated online.

Since the last formal meeting of the Taskforce in late 2019, I and my officials, in addition to the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications and his officials, have continued to engage closely with all Taskforce members and interested stakeholders to ensure that the good work of the Taskforce continues and is built upon, for example via the continued operation of the Joint Utilities Local Authority User Forum which is the primary means of addressing issues between local authorities, utilities and industry and in relation to ensuring that licensing rules remain fit for purpose. The lines of communication between former Taskforce members remain open and productive and good progress has been made on a number of fronts.

The work of the reconvened Task Force will involve engagement with colleagues from across local and national government and with the telecoms sector via Ibec. These engagements will begin at the earliest opportunity with the intention of re-establishing, on a formal footing, the very productive relationships that have endured over recent years.

