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 6, inclusive, answered orally.

Passport Services

7. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the reason for the delay in the provision of passports for children (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56350/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Section 14(1) of the Passports Act 2008, requires evidence of the consent of a child's guardians before a passport can be issued to them by the Passport Service.

In the case of the applications raised by the Deputy, incomplete Child Passport Identity and Consent forms were submitted.

It is essential that the Passport Service receives evidence of consent of a child's guardians duly witnessed and that consent is verified correctly before a passport can issue. This ensures that the Passport Service protects the integrity of the passport itself and the rights of the child and their guardians.

In this case, the Passport Service contacted the parent of the children on 6 November 2021, explaining the problem with the Child Passport Identity and Consent forms and requesting that new forms be correctly completed and returned. These will be processed immediately once received.

In recent years we have been monitoring and mitigating issues that arise for applicants during the online and paper based passport application process. We regularly advise applicants online to ensure that their consent form is correctly witnessed at the final stage of the online process.

Comprehensive instructions on how to complete these identity and consent forms are available on my Department's website (www.dfa.ie/passports/) and are also available to the applicant as they go through the online application process.

In summary, it is a three step process

1. One of the child's guardians must accompany the child to an appropriate witness;

2. The witness must know the child, confirm the child's identity and

3. Witness the signature of the guardian or guardians who have accompanied the child by

completing, signing and stamping the relevant sections of the online or paper application form.

If the second guardian is not present, they can, if necessary, ask another appropriate witness to witness their consent separately.

Questions Nos. 8 to 14, inclusive, answered orally.

Foreign Policy

15. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will notify the Israeli government of Ireland's objection and opposition to the forcible transfer and major dispossession of Palestinian property in Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan in occupied East Jerusalem (details supplied). [56446/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am concerned by the situation in and around East Jerusalem where tensions remain high.

Palestinian residents in the neighbourhoods of Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan have faced a long-standing threat of eviction. Settlement expansion in sensitive areas such as E1 around Jerusalem undermine the viability of a two-State solution.

During my recent visit to the region, I saw at first-hand the impact on Palestinian communities. In my meeting with Israeli Foreign Minister, Yair Lapid, I conveyed in clear terms my concerns about the situation in East Jerusalem. I raised the recent announcement of plans for over 3,000 new housing units and called on the Israeli authorities to cease all settlement activity, which is illegal under international law as set out in UN Security Council Resolution 2334.

Ireland's Representative Office in Ramallah regularly visit Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan, along with other diplomatic representatives and continue to monitor the situation closely, including attending legal proceedings on eviction cases. Ireland also funds a number of civil society partners that are active on human rights issues, which impact specifically on Palestinians in East Jerusalem, including in relation to evictions.

The Government's support for the Dáil motion earlier this year, declaring that Israel's settlement policy in occupied Palestinian territory amounts to unlawful de facto annexation, reflected our grave concern about the scale and character of settlements and their negative impact.

I have raised these issues with my EU counterparts at the Foreign Affairs Council and at the Security Council. Following recent settlement announcements, Ireland supported a request for the matter to be discussed at the Security Council on 8 November. The UN Deputy Special Coordinator in Jerusalem, Lynn Hastings, briefed the Council. Ireland underlined our concerns at the impact of this development on the viability of a future Palestinian State. Together with EU members of the Council as well as Norway and incoming member, Albania, Ireland made a joint press statement after the Council meeting highlighting the illegality of such settlements and calling for an end to them.

Foreign Policy

16. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will call in the Israeli Ambassador to raise with them the detention of six Palestinian men who are currently on hunger strike under administrative detention which allows these men to be held indefinitely without charge, without trial and without evidence; and if he will make a statement on the mat-

ter. [56503/21]

23. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the European Union is proposing action against Israel on the issue of Palestinian hunger strikers and demanding an end to their administrative detention; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56568/21]

24. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has had engagement with his counterparts in the European Union on the situation of Palestinian hunger strikers that are demanding an end to their administrative detention; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56567/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 16, 23 and 24 together.

I am aware of the Palestinian prisoners currently engaging in a hunger strike to protest their arrest under the Israeli policy of administrative detention, including the concerns raised by the International Committee of the Red Cross regarding the health of a number of these prisoners. I welcome the news that one of the individuals concerned has recently reached an agreement with the Israeli authorities to end his strike.

I share the concerns raised by EU Special Representative for Human Rights Eamon Gilmore on 16 November regarding the deteriorating health conditions of the detainees .

Irish officials are monitoring this matter, in cooperation with partners on the ground. Ireland supports the statement by the EU Delegation in Jerusalem on 5 November, calling on Israel to respect international law and avoid loss of life in this case, and reiterating the right of all detainees to a fair trial.

I support the call made on October by UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian Territory occupied since 1967, and the UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, to end completely the practice of administrative detention.

Ireland, and the EU, have repeatedly raised the treatment of Palestinian prisoners with the Israeli authorities. 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 established by law regarding arrest and detention.

Both Ireland and the EU also provide financial support to NGOs in Israel and in oPt who are active in bringing issues regarding the treatment of detainees to light.

Question No. 17 answered orally.

Passport Services

18. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of passport applications submitted in 2021 to date that were found to have an error on the consent form at checking stage; if he has plans to simplify the consent form or amend it to reduce possible future errors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56299/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Under Section 14(1) of the Passports Act 2008, the consent of a child's guardian(s) must be given before the Passport Service

can issue them a passport.

The Passport Service does not currently record the incidence of errors in consent forms at the important checking and validation stage. Our focus is always on the verification of consent which is vital to protect the integrity of the passport itself and the rights of the child and the guardians.

The Passport Service monitors and seeks to improve issues that arise for applicants during the online and paper based passport application process. The Passport Service advises applicants during the online application process to make sure that the consent form is correctly witnessed once they have completed the online process.

The Passport Service provides instructions on how to correctly complete these forms on the Department's website

(www.dfa.ie/passports/how-to-get-your-application-witnessed/).

In addition to this, the Passport Service maintains a close working relationship with An Garda Síochána and regularly offers training and guidance to Gardaí on the correct completion of the required identity and consent forms.

International Agreements

19. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has had recent discussions with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland regarding the need to implement in full the Stormont House Agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56352/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): It has been the consistent position of the Government that the Stormont House Agreement provides a balanced and comprehensive framework to address the legacy of the Troubles. It was agreed by both Governments and the political parties after intensive negotiations, and it should be implemented – for the families and victims who have waited for too long.

We have taken every opportunity in our regular engagements with the British Government at all levels to set out this position.

As agreed at the BIIGC on 24 June, the Government joined the British Government and the Northern Irish parties in a process of engagement of these issues, with discussions beginning in July. The intention is to find an agreed way forward that will allow implementing legislation to be introduced in both the UK and Ireland.

As we have consistently stated, a statute of limitations as proposed by the UK Government in their Command Paper is not something the Government can support. It is important to say that there has been a clear message from victims groups throughout this process that this cannot be the way forward. It has also been strongly and publicly opposed by all the parties.

It would also go against the conclusions of the UK Government's own extensive public consultation in Northern Ireland on legacy legislation in 2019. There would be very serious questions as to whether such an approach would be consistent with the obligations of the European Convention on Human Rights, which is itself a key element of the Good Friday Agreement. We believe it would face well-founded legal challenges, causing further years of uncertainly and pain for families.

We have consistently said that we are ready to engage with concerns or issues to do with the

implementation of the Stormont House Agreement but any such changes must be discussed and agreed by the parties and both Governments. It is vital that any approach is collective if it is to work, and crucially, that it meets both the needs of victims and our shared international human rights obligations.

It is crucial now to come back to the table at the level of political leaders to discuss next steps and find a way forward, with the two governments and the parties, that meets the needs of victims, and is based on the principles of justice, reconciliation and the rule of law. We have a responsibility to seek an agreed approach, for those families who have waited for too long.

European Union

20. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on his recent attendance at the second Plenary Session of the Conference on the Future of Europe. [56376/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Thomas Byrne): I participated in the second Plenary of the Conference on the Future of Europe which was held on 23 October in Strasbourg as a hybrid event. My colleague, the Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Senator Pippa Hackett, also participated as the second Government representative at the session. Also in attendance were the four Oireachtas representatives to the Plenary: Senator Alice-Mary Higgins; Ruairí Ó Murchú T.D.; Neale Richmond T.D.; and Niamh Smyth T.D., along with Ireland's National Citizen Representative, Noelle O'Connell.

The Conference Plenary comprises representatives from the European Commission, the Council, the European and national parliaments, and the National Citizen Representatives from all 27 member states as well as representatives of EU social and regional bodies.

The second Plenary's agenda covered reporting on both member states' Conference events and the meetings of the four Citizens' Panels held to date as well as a discussion on the Conference's multilingual Digital Platform.

Meetings of the Plenary Working Groups, held 22 October, preceded the Plenary session. There are nine Working Groups, each one focusing on one of the nine Conference themes. The Groups provide Plenary representatives with a chance for discussion of ideas, which in turn feeds in to proceedings at the Plenary.

At my request, I have been nominated to serve as a member of the Working Group on Digital Transformation while Minister Hackett, as Ireland's second Ministerial representative, participated in the European Democracy Working Group.

In my intervention at the Plenary session, I urged greater engagement with the Conference. I also highlighted the useful opportunity for discussion the digital platform provides while additionally noting the scope for further initiatives associated with the Platform such as greater live-streaming of events.

The Plenaries play an important role in the Conference process as they provide representatives with the chance to consider the ideas emerging from the citizens' discussions on Europe's future facilitated by the Conference.

The next Conference Plenary session will be held 17-18 December.

Foreign Birth Registration

21. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps that are being taken to rectify some of the impact the disruption to the operation of the foreign birth register during Covid-19 has had on applicants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56529/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am pleased to inform the Deputy that as of Monday, 15th November, the processing of Foreign Birth Registration resumed on a phased basis. My Department is fully committed to allocating additional resources over the coming weeks and months to assist with processing of the high volume of applications anticipated and the current level of applications on hand. There are currently 32,000 Foreign Birth Registration applications on hand with the Passport Service.

Throughout the pandemic, the Foreign Birth Registration Service considered all urgent requests to expedite an application on a case by case basis, in cases such as expectant parents, or stateless persons. Over 5,000 emergency Foreign Birth Registration applications have been processed in 2021.

Demand for Foreign Birth Registration services reached unprecedented levels following the Brexit referendum in 2016. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the processing time for Foreign Birth Registration applications stood at 18 months.

This processing time is due to the unprecedented peak in applications as a result of Brexit and to the rigorous validation both of identity and citizenship status which experienced staff at the Passport Service apply to all citizenship applications.

I am confident that the phased reopening of Foreign Birth Registration services will see improvements in the experience of applicants for citizenship and a return to pre-pandemic processing times. I want to express appreciation for the work of the Foreign Birth Registration teams in assisting in the provision of urgent passport and contact tracing services during the pandemic. So far this year, those teams have operated both an urgent Foreign Birth Registration service and assisted in the delivery of over 500,000 passports as part of our expanded essential passport services operation.

Passport Services

22. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of persons awaiting their passport to issue; the measures being taken to address the current backlog; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56468/21]

26. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the work being carried out by his Department to ensure speedy processing of passport applications and minimising delays; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56296/21]

30. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the Passport Office plans to reduce the length of time it takes for corrected documentation to be uploaded to a passport application; if these applications which have been already been initially checked can be processed immediately on receipt of the corrected information rather than the turnaround time being extended further; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56348/21]

39. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the reason Members of the Houses of the Oireachtas are restricted to making five enquiries regarding passport

applications per week even in circumstances in which the enquiries relate to passport applications which have already exceeded the stated timeframe for processing. [56302/21]

50. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position regarding the speed of applications being processed through the Passport Office; his views on the best way to improve to process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56561/21]

67. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on the issues with passport express; the way these may be resolved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56506/21]

68. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if an update will be provided on the expected new target delivery of passports following the announcement that over 450 new staff will be hired within the passport service; the way in which the passport service is preparing for the expected busiest year ever in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56290/21]

69. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the reason Members of the Houses of the Oireachtas are restricted to making five enquiries regarding passport applications per week; and the reason a follow-up query regarding the same application is considered a new query. [56303/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 22, 26, 30, 39, 50, 67, 68 and 69 together.

Passport Service operations were severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, as were many Government Services. Notwithstanding that disruption and despite the fact that the processing of passports requires physical distance on site to deliver this service during Level 5 restrictions, the Passport Service maintained operations throughout the pandemic. Passport Service staff also maintained contact with citizens and provided emergency passport services at all times since the onset of the pandemic.

The Passport Service has issued over half a million passports to date in 2021 and 45% of simple adult renewals issue within one business day.

The current passport processing 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

- 8 weeks for An Post's mail-in "Passport Express" service

The passport processing times are based on current average application turnaround times and apply to passport applications that are fully complete, where all required supporting documentation has been correctly submitted to the Passport Service by the applicant.

There are currently 98,000 online applications and 10,000 paper applications on hand with the Passport Service. Applications can take longer than the average turnaround time if applicants have not provided all of the required documentation to correctly complete their application. Of the online applications, 34,000 or 35% of applications are incomplete and require the applicant to submit additional documents. The Passport Service engages with all applicants who have not submitted the required documentation to ensure that their application is completed correctly and can proceed through the processing system.

Of the online applications that are currently with the Passport Service for processing, approximately 7% are past the estimated issue-by date. These applications are being prioritised by the Passport Service who are working very hard to eliminate these delays.

The Passport Service continually examines how to improve processing times and engagement with applicants. Preparation is currently underway for several system and service improvements that will enhance the customer service experience and will improve processing times. A particular improvement that will be of interest to Deputies is a change to the documentary management process that will reduce the turnaround time when additional documents need to be submitted by the applicant. These improvements will be rolled out in the coming weeks and months.

In the context of the National Development Plan, my Department is making a major investment in the future of the Passport Service. Over the next couple of years, we will replace the core technology underpinning the service, which will deliver efficiencies and a more resilient passport system. Budget 2022 also included an investment of an additional €10m in passport services in response to the increasing demand for passports both at home and abroad.

Adequate staffing of the Passport Service to respond to demand remains a priority for my Department and is an issue that is kept under constant review. My Department is actively working with the Public Appointments Service on an ongoing basis to recruit and assign additional staff to meet the current and forecasted high demand for passports. Additional permanent and temporary officers will be assigned between now and the end of January 2022, bringing total staff numbers to 920 and effectively doubling the number of staff at the Passport Service since June of this year.

In addition, the Passport Service is working with relevant divisions within my Department to ensure the health and safety of all staff and is finalising plans in co-operation with the OPW to ensure that additional staff will be accommodated to meet the anticipated increased demand for passports expected in 2022.

With regard to the dedicated passport phone line, as Deputies will be aware a temporary line has been established to respond to queries on urgent passports cases.

For operational reasons queries on this temporary line are restricted to fifteen per week, this was previously 5 per week. The Emergency Passport service remains available in cases of medical emergency or death of a family member abroad. In addition, the Passport Offices in Mount St, Dublin 2 and in Cork are now offering an Urgent Appointment Service for the renewal of passports. To avail of the Urgent Appointment Service for Passport Renewal, applicants can book an appointment through the Department of Foreign Affairs website (www.dfa.ie/passports). Over 800 urgent appointments have been facilitated since the Passport Service launched this service on 27th September 2021.

My Department fully recognises that Passport Express, and Northern Ireland Passport Express, continue to be an important channel for applicants who do not wish to use the online system or who have limited digital skills. Demand for the Passport Express service has fallen significantly since 2019 as more applicants choose Passport Online and benefit from the faster turnaround times available through this efficient online service.

Passport Online will continue to be the priority channel given the efficiencies that are inbuilt in the system for both the applicant and the Passport Service. The processing of an online application is consistently up to four times faster than the processing time of a paper application.

Passport Online can be accessed by all first time applicants, irrespective of age both children and adults, in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Great Britain, Europe, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA. All Irish citizens, including children, can use the online system to renew their passports from anywhere in the world.

I urge citizens to check the validity of their passports before booking travel and to ensure that they apply in plenty of time. In the case of people planning to travel in 2022, whose passports are already out of date or who have children who are first-time applicants, I would encourage them to apply now online.

Question No. 23 answered with Question No. 16.

Question No. 24 answered with Question No. 16.

Foreign Conflicts

25. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the efforts Ireland is making at both European Union level and at the United Nations Security Council to bring an end to the conflict in Yemen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56495/21]

51. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on the efforts being made by Ireland at the United Nations to help to resolve the crisis situation in Yemen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56184/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 25 and 51 together.

Yemen is the world's worst humanitarian crisis, driven by seven years of conflict, economic collapse and the breakdown of public institutions and services which has left over 24 million people in need of humanitarian assistance.

Ireland along with all EU member states fully supports the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Hans Grundberg in his efforts to secure a nationwide ceasefire, and the resumption of an inclusive Yemeni-led and Yemeni-owned political process, as set out in relevant United Nations resolutions, including Security Council resolution 2216 (2015).

As part of our role on the Security Council, Ireland is maintaining a very high level of engagement on Yemen with key parties in the region. I have engaged extensively with both the Government of Yemen and countries of the region this year to urge them to work urgently and constructively towards a sustainable peace. At the High Level Week in New York in September, I met with the Foreign Ministers of Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Iran, urging all to support efforts towards peace in Yemen. I also held discussions with the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Hans Grundberg in Amman on 4 November where he updated me on the worsening security situation in the country.

The EU also continues its active diplomatic outreach to relevant actors in support of the efforts of the UN Special Envoy. During his visit to the Gulf from 30 September – 4 October, EU HRVP Josef Borrell reiterated European Union support to the UN-led peace efforts.

Ireland will continue to support all efforts towards peace in Yemen, including at the Security Council, where we have consistently called on all parties to engage urgently and seriously with the UN led process.

Question No. 26 answered with Question No. 22.

Northern Ireland

27. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when the Government in view of the British plans to issue an amnesty for troubles related crimes will legislate for legacy mechanisms with specific reference to the Independent Commission on Information Retrieval. [56581/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): It has been the consistent position of the Government that the Stormont House Agreement provides a balanced and comprehensive framework to address to the legacy of the Troubles. It was agreed by both Governments and the political parties after intensive negotiations, and it should be fully implemented – for the families and victims who have waited for too long.

The framework of the Stormont House Agreement provided for a set of institutions to deal comprehensively and fairly with the legacy of the Troubles, and this framework included an Independent Commission on Information Retrieval (ICIR) for truth recovery, to be available to victims and survivors across the UK and Ireland. The objective of the ICIR will be to enable victims and survivors to seek and privately receive information about the Troubles-related deaths of their next of kin.

The Irish and British Governments concluded an agreement on the establishment of the ICIR in October 2015. As set out in that agreement, the Commission will consist of five members; an Independent Chairperson of international standing, appointed by the two Governments, one Commissioner each appointed by the Irish and British Governments, and two Commissioners appointed jointly by Northern Ireland's First Minister and deputy First Minister.

The ICIR agreement was signed by the Minister for Foreign Affairs in October 2015 and laid before the Oireachtas in January 2016. The Independent Commission can only be formally established once the necessary legislation has been enacted in both jurisdictions and the two Governments have notified each other of completion of all other domestic legal procedures required to bring the agreement into force.

I have engaged extensively with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on these issues to urge him to move forward with the implementation of the Stormont House Agreement legacy bodies, including the ICIR, and we remain in ongoing contact to support a way forward on these matters.

It is crucial that we find a way forward with the two governments and the parties that meets the needs of victims, and is based on the principles of justice, reconciliation and the rule of law. We have a responsibility to seek an agreed approach, for those families who have waited for too long.

Northern Ireland

28. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will raise with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland the long-standing concerns of the families of the victims of the Springhill Westrock Massacre of July 1972 in relation to the totally unacceptable delay in holding an inquest; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56353/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Every family bereaved in the conflict, including the family members of the victims of those shot dead in Springhill Westrock in Belfast on 9 July 1972, must have access to an effective investigation and to a process of

justice regardless of the perpetrator. All victims' families deserve support in securing all the information possible about what happened to their loved ones.

Last July marked the 49th anniversary of the Springhill Westrock massacre, which saw Margaret Gargan, John Dougal, David McCafferty, Patrick Butler and Fr Noel Fitzpatrick lose their lives. Their deaths at Springhill were part of the tragic legacy of the Troubles which saw the loss of over 3500 lives from all communities.

The Government welcomed the announcement in 2014 of a new inquest into the deaths of the five Springhill victims by the then Northern Ireland Attorney General John Larkin. It is understood that earlier this year, the case was listed for a pre-inquest hearing, which is expected to take place in the next 12-18 months. It is a matter of disappointment and frustration that it has taken this long for the family's case to reach this stage. The outcome of the Ballymurphy Inquest demonstrated what can still be achieved on these complex legacy cases all these years later, and the impact that it can have.

As agreed at the BIIGC on 24 June, the Government joined the British Government and the Northern Irish parties in a process of intensive engagement on legacy issues, with discussions beginning in July. The intention is to find an agreed way forward that will allow implementing legislation to be introduced in both the UK and Ireland by the end of this Autumn.

As we have consistently stated, a statute of limitations and the discontinuation of inquests, as proposed by the UK Government in their Command Paper ,is not something that the Government can support. It is important to say that there has been a clear message from victims groups throughout this process that this cannot be the way forward. It has also been strongly and publicly opposed by all the parties.

We have consistently said that we are ready to engage with concerns or issues to do with the implementation of the Stormont House agreement but any such changes must be discussed and agreed by the parties and both Governments. It is vital that any approach is collective if it is to work, and crucially, that it meets both the needs of victims and our shared international human rights obligations.

United Nations

29. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the actions Ireland has taken at the United Nations Security Council and at the European Union to help bring an end to the conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia; the funding Ireland has provided in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56297/21]

45. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has had correspondence with the Irish Ambassador in Addis Ababa regarding the situation facing the Tigray in Ethiopia; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56573/21]

47. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he plans to raise the situation in northern Ethiopia with the United Nations Security Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56565/21]

53. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has had an engagement with either the United Nations Security Council, the European Union or the Ethiopian authorities regarding the current situation pertaining to the Tigray people; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56569/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 29, 45, 47 and 53 together.

I am gravely concerned by the worsening situation in Tigray and other parts of Ethiopia, including the recent escalation in military operations and declaration of a state of emergency which are magnifying the ongoing humanitarian crisis.

Through our bilateral engagements, as well as within the European Union and at the UN Security Council, Ireland continues to advocate for urgent and unimpeded humanitarian access, a negotiated ceasefire, and political dialogue aimed at resolving the conflict. Accountability for violations of international law committed by all parties, including as described in the recent joint Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights/Ethiopian Human Rights Commission report, is essential.

There has been a shocking rise in hate speech, arbitrary arrests and detentions, including of UN staff, and other acts likely to fuel tensions. Human rights, democracy and fundamental freedoms are universal and inalienable values that States must uphold. No individual should be deprived of their liberty without legal authority, or without necessary procedural protections. Reason for detention must be provided promptly to those affected, as well as access to legal counsel and the right to have the lawfulness of the detention reviewed by a court. If not, those detained should be released.

It is clear there can be no military solution to this crisis. I strongly support the efforts of African Union Envoy, the former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, to mediate a way forward, supported by key regional actors.

Ireland has been to the fore of efforts to address the conflict at the Security Council. On 5 November, we secured agreement on the first Council statement in six months on the situation, which called for a cessation of hostilities and ceasefire negotiations, alongside respect of international humanitarian law, safe and unhindered humanitarian access, the re-establishment of public services, and the scaling up of humanitarian assistance.

Ireland continue to push for a strong and constructive EU response to the crisis. At the Foreign Affairs Council in October and again earlier this week, Minister Coveney emphasised the need to ensure humanitarian access, to halt the fighting, and to incentivise dialogue —including through possible use of restrictive measures if required.

As the conflict extends further throughout the country, my Department has issued a travel advisory for citizens not to travel to Ethiopia. Ireland's Embassy in Addis Ababa is in regular ongoing contact with Ministers and officials, and continues to provide vital consular support for Irish citizens in the country.

To date, Ireland has provided over €4.4 million in humanitarian aid to Tigray and Amhara and for refugees in neighbouring Sudan. We will continue to prioritise humanitarian need while this crisis persists.

Question No. 30 answered with Question No. 22.

European Union

31. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the actions Ireland will be advocating for at European Union level in response to ongoing efforts by the right-wing Polish government to undermine the judiciary in Poland; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

[56493/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland is very concerned by recent reforms to Poland's justice system. We have consistently underlined the importance of upholding core EU values including the rule of law. An independent judiciary that can exercise its function without interference is a core tenet of the rule of law.

Ireland has expressed this position through active participation in the Article 7 hearings at the General Affairs Council regarding developments of concern in Poland's justice system. We will continue to engage in dialogue on this matter at EU level.

In July, the European Court of Justice determined that the Supreme Court Disciplinary Chamber in Poland, which substantially altered the country's disciplinary regime for judges, was not compatible with EU law and should be suspended. A subsequent decision by the Court in October required Poland to pay a daily penalty due to its failure to comply in full with the measures arising from the July judgment. Ireland has and will continue to urge Poland to comply in full with these rulings and orders.

Ireland's position is clear - access to EU funds should be contingent on upholding EU values, particularly rule of law. We view the *Regulation on a General Regime of Conditionality for the Protection of the Union Budget* as fair, proportionate, and serving an important purpose in addressing challenges of the kind associated with Poland's justice system. As such, Ireland recently intervened along with nine other Member States on the side of the Council and Parliament to oppose an action to annul the Conditionality Regulation brought by Poland and Hungary. Judgment on this case is now awaited.

Ireland also supports Commission President Von der Leyen's recent statement that Poland must comply with the decisions of the Court of Justice including the dismantling of the Supreme Court Disciplinary Chamber to access the EU's Recovery and Resilience Programme funds.

Foreign Conflicts

32. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on the clashes between junta forces and forces of the militant group in Rakhine state in Myanmar; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56496/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland has strongly condemned the coup carried out by the Myanmar military and violence against civilians. The coup is a reversal of the progress made towards democracy and rule of law in Myanmar that has taken years to establish, and does nothing to tackle the public health, security or economic issues faced by the people of Myanmar. I have made three statements and called upon the Myanmar military to demonstrate restraint, respect human rights and the rule of law, immediately release political detainees and restore legitimate civilian government.

I am deeply concerned by the escalation of armed conflict across Myanmar, significant deployment of the armed forces in rural areas, and an increase in clashes, causing civilian casualties and displacement. In recent weeks, tensions have increased, leading to concerns, especially in northern Rakhine, that the armed conflict will escalate in this region again. We are witnessing a daily deterioration in the humanitarian situation in Myanmar and the overwhelming impact of the military action is being felt by the civilian population.

I am deeply concerned for the Rohingya people, especially those within IDP camps in Rakhine State. Ireland has provided direct funding of over €7.1 million since 2017 to support the

Rohingya crisis, supporting vulnerable communities living in conflict affected areas of Rakhine state and Rohingya refugee settlements in Bangladesh. Our support has focused on food, nutrition, shelter, water and sanitation. We have consistently voiced support for international efforts towards ensuring accountability and justice in Myanmar and we will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to those most in need.

Ireland is active in multilateral fora to highlight the situation in Myanmar, including in our role as an elected member of the United Nations Security Council. The Council has considered the situation in Myanmar seven times since the coup, most recently on 8 November 2021, after which a Press Statement was issued. The European Union also issued a statement of 8 November calling for an immediate end to violence.

Overseas Development Aid

33. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which Ireland's overseas aid programme bilateral and multilateral continues to meet the needs of the populace in the various locations for which it is intended with particular reference to the need to alleviate starvation and human rights abuses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56456/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy): Ireland's Official Development Assistance (ODA), is directed through multilateral and bilateral channels, to countries and people who are in greatest need. There is a specific emphasis across our work on addressing hunger and ensuring human rights are met. This is reflected in A Better World, Ireland's international development policy, which identifies food as a key area for intervention, and asserts our intention to reach those that are furthest behind first in all our work.

Our ability to follow-through on these commitments in practice is evident in, for example, the high proportion of Irish Aid funding which targets least developed and low income countries. Where the average DAC member's bilateral allocation to these countries is just under one quarter, half of Irish ODA is bilateral aid to low income and least developed countries. Irish ODA also places a strong emphasis on fragile contexts, where the scourge of hunger is most prevalent. In 2020, Ireland spent more than €193 million on projects that addressed hunger.

Our commitment to, and ability to deliver on, a needs-based allocation of development assistance is also internationally recognised. In 2020, the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) highlighted Ireland as "an excellent humanitarian partner", with its funding models a "useful inspiration for other DAC donors".

Last year, the respected international think-tank ODI assessed the characteristics of ODA expenditure in leading donors and found Ireland to be the most principled donor, noting specifically Ireland's needs-based approach.

Nearly one-tenth of the world's population, or over 800 million people, are undernourished. During September's Food Systems Summit, Ireland played a key role in championing action on hunger, and particularly the most severe form of malnutrition- wasting.

Ireland is also championing a human-rights based approach to hunger, through our work at the UN Security Council on Resolution 2417 on hunger and conflict, as well as at the EU, UN and Council of Europe.

Passport Services

34. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of outstanding passport applicants that were submitted more than one, two, three, four, five and six months ago; and the envisaged timeframe to clear the backlog in passport applications. [56439/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The data requested by Deputy Carthy is outlined in tabular form below. The figures cover the number of passport applications received from May to October 2021 that are currently with the Passport Service. The table also sets out for comparative purposes the numbers of passports issued in the same months.

Over half a million passports have been issued in 2021 to date.

The Passport Service is currently experiencing high demand for first time passports with 64% of applications coming from first time applicants, the majority of which were received in October and late September and are still within the processing time of 40 working days. First time applications are complex to process, since they are essentially applications for Irish citizenship. Accordingly, a rigorous process is in place to verify the identity of the applicant and their entitlement to Irish citizenship. In the case of first time applications for children, the consent of guardians must also be thoroughly validated.

Applications can take longer if applicants have not provided the required documentation to complete their application. Currently, 35% of all online applicants and 45% of first time applicants have not submitted the documents needed to issue their passport. These applications cannot be moved forward and processed until the applicants have submitted the necessary documentation.

Adequate staffing of the Passport Service to respond to demand remains a priority for my Department and is an issue that is kept under constant review. My Department is actively working with the Public Appointments Service on an ongoing basis to recruit and assign additional staff to meet the current and forecasted high demand for passports. Additional permanent and temporary officers will be assigned between now and the end of January 2022, bringing total staff to 920 and effectively doubling the number of staff at the Passport Service since June of this year.

Month	Passports issued	Applications on hand at 15/11/21
September 2021	76,802	18,500
August 2021	76,519	12,400
July 2021	73,676	9,800
June 2021	63,953	6,900
May 2021	77,152	1,400

Question No. 35 answered orally.

United Nations

36. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the role the United Nations can take to protect citizens and their rights in Afghanistan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [55589/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Afghanistan faces multiple human rights, security and economic situation challenges, and a worsening humanitarian crisis. The UN is playing a vital role in all these areas.

The absence of many non-governmental organisations, civil society networks, and diplomatic missions from Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover of Kabul has made the role of the UN in monitoring developments inside Afghanistan, including on human rights, is particularly important. Representatives of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) have met with high-ranking members of the Taliban administration in recent weeks to highlight Afghanistan's human rights obligations under international law. UNAMA personnel have also engaged with key contacts at regional level on human rights. Upholding human rights and the protection of civilians within the maintenance of international peace and security are key priorities of Ireland's Security Council term. Ireland has expressed its grave concerns at reports from Afghanistan on curtailments of human rights, at intimidation and violence against minorities, at repression of peaceful protests and self-censorship by Afghan journalists. We have also underlined that Afghan women and girls must be treated as equal citizens, with full and equal access to education, to healthcare, to freedom of movement and participation in public life.

The UN Human Rights Council met in special session last August and adopted a resolution on strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights in Afghanistan. During its October session, the EU led a resolution on the "Situation of human rights in Afghanistan" that establishes a mandate for a Special Rapporteur, to be appointed at the March 2022 session. In an oral update during the session, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, pledged her commitment to "continu(ing) to work to the full extent of our capacity to monitor the rights of the Afghan people and assist, wherever possible, in protecting and advancing those rights". In its engagement in all international fora, and especially the UN Security Council, Ireland will continue to prioritise the rights of Afghans and will work to ensure the fullest access by UNAMA to continue its critical monitoring and reporting from Afghanistan to ensure that human rights are protected and defended.

Departmental Projects

37. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his Department has evacuated all Irish citizens from Afghanistan. [56320/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): A total of 107 Irish citizens and their dependents have been assisted in evacuating Afghanistan since the crisis broke in mid-August. There are 12 citizens and dependents currently seeking support in exiting Afghanistan. A small number of citizens wish to remain in the country.

My Department, including through our Embassy in Abu Dhabi, continues to work with EU Member States and partners in the region to support the ongoing evacuation efforts. We are appreciative of the continuing cooperation with the Government of Qatar in this regard.

Brexit Issues

38. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if passport cards will still be recognised as a valid travel document by the United Kingdom going forward post-Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56295/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Common Travel Area (CTA) is made up of Ireland, the United Kingdom, Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man. Under the Common Travel Area arrangements Irish and British citizens can move, live, work and study freely within the Common Travel Area.

Border controls at British entry points are a matter for the British authorities.

The British government advises that Irish citizens do not need to show their passport to a Border Force officer when travelling from Ireland to Great Britain. However, Irish citizens may be asked to show documentation that confirms their identity and nationality. Such documents may include:

- a valid Irish passport or passport card

- a copy of Irish passport or passport card with identity and nationality clearly visible

- an expired Irish passport or passport card

- evidence of having obtained British or Irish citizenship

Other forms of identity may be accepted and British authorities advise that these are considered on a case by case basis by Border Force.

Some airlines and other carriers require that Irish citizens have a valid passport to travel with them to the United Kingdom. Travellers should check with their airline regarding specific travel document requirements before travelling.

Question No. 39 answered with question No. 22

Question No. 40 answered orally.

Departmental Communications

41. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on engagement he has had with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus on the situation facing migrants on the Belarussian-Polish border; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56564/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Taoiseach, Minister Byrne and I have had no recent bilateral contacts with the Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vladimir Makei.

It is important to engage at different levels to stop the weaponisation of migration, and Ireland's engagement on this issue has been multilateral, through both the UN and EU. Through our membership of the UN Security Council, we co-sponsored a discussion on this matter at the Security Council only last week. Ireland has supported the graduated imposition of EU restrictive measures against the Belarusian regime since October 2020. EU Foreign Ministers agreed a broadened listings criteria for the application of sanctions at the Foreign Affairs Council on Monday 15 November. Ireland is co-sponsoring this fifth package of EU sanctions, which are being introduced in direct response to the instrumentalisation of migrants. We also support EU outreach to countries of origin to stem the flow of migrants to Belarus, by communicating the considerable risks and dangers associated with facilitating irregular migration.The Taoiseach and I, and most recently Minister of State Byrne, have all met with leading opposition figure Ms. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya to demonstrate Ireland's solidarity and support for civil society

in Belarus in these difficult times.

United Nations

42. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the actions he has taken to ensure that the United Nations Security Council brings pressure to bear on the leaders of the coup in Sudan to make way for the civilian government of Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and also use their influence with regional allies of the Sudanese junta to withdraw their financial support for the military regime; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56504/21]

55. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on the response to the recent coup in Sudan; the efforts Ireland is making at European Union level and at the United Nations Security Council to push for a negotiated return to democracy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56494/21]

56. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he plans to raise the coup in Sudan at the United Nations Security Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56566/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 42, 55 and 56 together.

Last month's military coup was a major setback to Sudan's hard-won democratic transition. The military leadership's violent crackdown on the country's civilian and civil society leadership, mass detention of protestors and methodical dismantling of transitional institutions are unacceptable.

It is vital that the international community send a strong message: the democratic transition must be restored and all those unlawfully detained must be released. Ireland continues to stress this at the United Nations and within the European Union. Sudan's democratic transition is too important to fail, for the people of Sudan, and for the stability of the Horn of Africa region as a whole.

Ireland supported a Security Council Press Statement on 28 October condemning the coup, and was unequivocal in denouncing the action by Sudan's military leaders at two Council meetings on Sudan, most recently on 11 November. We continue to keep further Council action under consideration, as we support the mediation efforts of the African Union, United Nations and EU envoys.

We have also pushed for a strong EU response. High Representative Josep Borrell issued a statement on 26 October on behalf of the 27 EU member States warning of serious consequences if the move to dismantle the transitional government was not reversed. At the EU Foreign Affairs Council on 15 November Minister Coveney discussed the need to incentivise a return to the path to democracy, including exploring all tools at our disposal.

Ireland is ready to consider further restrictive or financial measures, including under the EU's Global Human Rights sanctions regime, while keeping in mind the increasing humanitarian needs on the ground.

We also remain concerned by the deteriorating human rights situation. At the Human Rights Council Special Session on Sudan on 5 November, Ireland urged the military authorities to respect the rights of peaceful assembly and return to the full implementation of the Constitutional Document and the Juba Peace Agreement.

As the crisis evolves, my officials, including through our Embassy in Nairobi accredited to Sudan, will continue to closely monitor the situation and work with our partners for a cohesive collective response and restoration of the democratic transition.

United Nations

43. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the role the United Nations can usefully take to protect citizens and their rights in Myanmar; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [55588/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland strongly condemns the coup carried out by the Myanmar military and its attempts to legitimise the military regime. The coup is a reversal of the progress made towards democracy and rule of law in Myanmar that has taken years to establish. Ireland is actively engaging in our role as an elected member of the Security Council to call on all sides to refrain from violence, and to fully respect human rights and comply with international law, including international humanitarian and human rights law.

The situation in Myanmar has been considered seven times by the United Nations Security Council, most recently on 8 November 2021, after which a Press Statement was issued. The Council has expressed deep concern regarding developments in Myanmar, condemning the use of violence by the military, and called for the release of all those detained. It is welcome that the Security Council has taken a united position on this crisis, sending a strong message to the Myanmar military. Ireland was also a member of the core group of nations who proposed the June 2021 United Nations General Assembly resolution which called for a stop to the flow of arms to Myanmar.

The situation remains on the agenda of the Security Council and we will continue to work with partners in search of a resolution. My officials also maintain regular contact with civil society organisations in Myanmar, and with those working to alleviate the humanitarian crisis there.

Military rule opens scope for further human rights abuses in Myanmar and Ireland has voiced its concern at four sessions of the Human Rights Council since February 2021. Ireland has consistently voiced support for international efforts towards ensuring accountability and justice in Myanmar, including the ongoing processes at the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court.

Ireland will continue to work actively to use our influence with partners and through our position on the Security Council to promote the rule of law and protect the human rights of the people of Myanmar.

Foreign Policy

44. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on Israel's plans for the construction of around 3,000 settlement units in the West Bank. [56510/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland has consistently and strongly opposed settlements and will continue to do so. Settlement expansion, demolitions and evictions threaten the viability of a two-state solution.

Ireland has expressed serious concern in relation to the recent announcements by Israeli authorities of plans for the construction of more than 3,000 settlement units in the West Bank. On 28 October, Ireland joined 11 other European states in issuing a statement urging the Israeli

authorities to reverse the decision.

I saw myself on my recent visit to the occupied Palestinian territory the impact that settlements are having on Palestinian communities and on the viability of a future Palestinian State. I am particularly concerned about developments in strategically sensitive areas around East Jerusalem.

During my recent visit to the region, I met with Israeli Foreign Minister, Yair Lapid. I conveyed in clear terms my concern at recent announcements and called on the Israeli authorities to cease all settlement activity, which is illegal under international law. Ireland will continue to raise the issue at the Security Council, as well as at EU level. Ireland supported a call for the Security Council to discuss the recent announcements and this meeting took place on 8 November.

The UN Deputy Special Coordinator briefed the Council on the issue and Ireland underlined the illegality of the settlements at the meeting. Ireland joined EU Members of the Council in a Joint Press Statement together with Norway and incoming member Albania, following the meeting of the Security Council, which urged Israel to halt settlement activity. *Question No. 45 answered with question No. 29.*

Climate Change Negotiations

46. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the participation of his Department at the COP26 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Glasgow; his views on the way in which the Conference proposals will help to progress collective international climate action efforts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56183/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy): My Department was actively involved in both the preparations for, and the discussions at, COP26 in Glasgow this year. Both Minister Coveney and I each attended in Glasgow for one day, participating in stakeholder events and also having bilateral meetings.

Ahead of COP26, my Department worked closely with officials in the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, which leads on climate issues, as well as with other relevant Departments and Agencies to prepare Ireland's priorities and position.

Ireland is represented by the European Union at the UN Climate Conference. My Department engaged in EU working groups and related negotiations at COP26 on issues on which the Department of Foreign Affairs leads for the Government, such as: climate change adaptation; Loss and Damage associated with climate change impact; and climate finance to support developing countries to address climate change.

Ahead of and during COP26, my Department was particularly active in drawing attention to the urgent need to scale up financial support to climate adaptation in developing countries. This effort was most prominent through The Champions Group on Adaptation Finance which I officially launched at the UN General Assembly in September this year, together with the Governments of Denmark, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Sweden and Finland.

There was notable progress made at COP26 on adaptation financing, including through strong language in the Glasgow Climate Pact for developed countries to collectively at least double their adaptation finance by 2025. Pledges to the Adaptation Fund at this COP were $356 million, exceeding all expectations. Similarly, the Least Developed Countries Fund raised $413 million. Ireland announced new pledges to both funds, with a record €10 million for the Adaptation Fund (from DECC) and €2.5 million for the Least Developed Countries Fund (from DFA).

As with many previous UN Climate Conferences, the overall outcome from the Glasgow COP is mixed. This is partly due to the reality that the COP is a multilateral process that requires endorsement of 197 countries. As a result, the Glasgow Climate Pact attempts to strike a balance between increasing climate ambition and sufficiently supporting developing countries to address the growing impacts of climate change.

Some of the most notable features of the Glasgow Climate Pact include:

- An ambitious work programme to cut emissions this decade;

- Renewed commitments to increase climate finance to achieve the $100bn goal per annum, and a doubling of adaptation finance to support developing countries;

- Finalising the governance of the Paris Agreement;

- New provisions to address fossil fuel subsidies and unabated coal;

- Establishing the Santiago Network to provide technical assistance to support developing countries on loss and damage caused through climate change; and

- Providing for a future dialogue to discuss funding arrangements to avert, minimise and address loss and damage.

Question No. 47 answered with Question No. 29.

Departmental Strategies

48. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the progress being made in the Nordic Strategy. [56488/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I launched the "Global Ireland: A Strategy for the Nordic Region to 2025" in June 2021. This Strategy is a whole of Government approach to our engagement with the Nordic region, which encompasses Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The Nordic region is one with which Ireland has long-standing ties and shares similar values in the areas of peace, security and in our joint attachment to a rules-based international order. This is currently well reflected in our close cooperation with Norway as non-permanent members of the UN Security Council for the period 2021-22. The Nordic Strategy reflects Ireland's goal of increasing our engagement with the Nordic states through deepening cooperation in trade, tourism, education, science and culture.

Following the launch of the Strategy, officials in my Department have been engaging with stakeholders in other Departments, State agencies, and our diplomatic missions in the Nordic region, as well as Nordic diplomatic missions accredited to Ireland to draft actions to fulfil the commitments of the Strategy. This work will be completed shortly. The Nordic Strategy will require close collaboration with the five Nordic governments. My officials are in close contact with relevant counterparts. The Nordic Strategy was welcomed by the Nordic Governments with great enthusiasm and senior Nordic Government representatives participated in the launch of the Strategy on 2 June.

My Department is already implementing commitments from the Strategy including jointly hosting the next Ireland/Nordic-Baltic 8 conference in December with the involvement of the Nordic and Baltic embassies based in Dublin. We have also initiated a programme of ministerial and official engagements with our Nordic counterparts**.** I also wish to acknowledge the recent and very welcome decision by the Government of Sweden to re-open its resident Embassy in

Dublin, which was closed in 2010. This will be an additional resource for engagement with a key Nordic partner and will assist us in driving forward the Nordic Strategy in the years ahead.

European Union

49. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the actions Ireland and the European Union are taking to support political prisoners in Belarus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56459/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland has condemned the unjust detention of political prisoners in Belarus. We are committed to keeping the situation in the country high on the international agenda. It is unacceptable that the current regime detains individuals without due cause or process. Freedom of expression is a core element of civil society space which is a leading foreign policy priority for Ireland.

I know many members of the Oireachtas have 'adopted' political prisoners and I commend them for maintaining awareness of their plight.

Ireland has raised this and related issues at multiple international fora, including at informal meetings of United Nations Security Council members, sponsoring "Arria formula" discussions on Belarus. These are important ways to put additional pressure on the Lukashenko regime to adhere to their international obligations and commitments.

Ireland has also played a supporting role at the Human Rights Council in Geneva, where a successful EU-led resolution granted an investigative mandate to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to examine human rights violations. Along with our EU partners, we also secured a mandate renewal for the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus.

Finally, Ireland is co-sponsoring a fifth package of sanctions against entities and individuals complicit in the Lukashenko regime's human rights violations.

Question No. 50 answered with question No. 22

Question No. 51 answered with Question No. 25.

European Union

52. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has had an engagement with the European Union on the migrant situation in Belarus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56572/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I have had extensive engagements with my European Union counterparts and with the relevant EU institutions regarding the situation of migrants at the Belarusian border over recent weeks.

On Monday, myself and other EU Foreign Affairs Ministers agreed at the Foreign Affairs Council to broaden the listings criteria for a fifth package of sanctions. The EU will now be able to target individuals and entities organising or contributing to activities by the Lukashenko regime that facilitate illegal crossing of the EU's external borders. Ireland had co-sponsored this package which shows our solidarity with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, and with those trapped at the border. This follows the EU's progressive introduction of restrictions against the Lukash-

enko regime since November 2020.

Ireland also supports the European institutions in their outreach to countries of origin to stem the flow of irregular migration at source. In August, following outreach from High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell Fontelles, Iraq agreed to suspend flights to Belarus. In recent days, some airlines have made commitments that will effectively ban access to their flights by potential irregular migrants. I am hopeful that in the coming weeks the EU's continuing engagement will result in a diminishing flow of migrants to Belarus.

We have also engaged at the EU level to address the humanitarian situation at the Belarus-Poland border. Ireland has expressed its support for the deployment of experts from Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, to the border region. I also believe that international organisations and independent monitors and journalists should be allowed to access both sides of the border

I am grateful to the Lithuanian government who facilitated Minister of State Byrne's recent visit to Lithuanian-Belarussian border. As part of that visit, Minister Byrne was able to view some migrant camps that have been established by the Lithuanian Government, to meet with the Lithuanian Border Guards and with the Lithuanian Red Cross, which this year has received a contribution of €100,000 from Irish Aid.

Question No. 53 answered with Question No. 29.

Foreign Policy

54. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when the Government will recognise the state of Palestine as previously committed to. [56440/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Programme for Government states that the Government will "Honour our commitment to recognise the State of Palestine as part of a lasting settlement of the conflict, or in advance of that, when we believe doing so will progress efforts to reach a Two-State solution or protect the integrity of Palestinian territory".

As I have stated previously, in the absence of progress towards a two-State solution, I would be prepared to recommend to the Government early recognition by Ireland of a State of Palestine. The timing and context for such consideration is critical.

During my visit to Israel, the occupied Palestinian territory, and Jordan from 1-5 November, I was clear in my engagement with both the new Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority of the commitment of this Government to advancing a two-State solution, in line with the agreed parameters for a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I urged all parties – the Palestinian leadership and Israel – to work for a two-State solution, including through strengthening Palestinian institutions, the rule of law and the process of democratic renewal, which are critical elements of state building.

Question No. 55 answered with Question No. 42.

Question No. 56 answered with Question No. 42.

Question No. 57 answered orally.

Northern Ireland

58. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has raised concerns with the British or Northern Ireland authorities in relation to security policing in certain areas (details supplied); the response he received to these concerns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56481/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Deputy will be aware that we in Government engage regularly with the British Government, the NI Executive and other key stakeholders to discuss a wide range of issues relating to Northern Ireland, including security matters. In addition to these engagements, officials on the ground in Northern Ireland and in Dublin work with community leaders on issues such as community confidence in policing.

It is deeply regrettable that, 23 years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, dissident republican and loyalist paramilitary groups continue to pose a threat and impact negatively on their own communities.

I am aware that the attitudes and perceptions within the communities can act as a barrier to confidence in policing and that security led operations can have a negative impact in certain locations. These points have been discussed between my officials and the relevant authorities in Northern Ireland, including with the PSNI and the Policing Board.

This month marks 20 years of the PSNI and this occasion has provided the opportunity for a range of reflections from communities, academics and justice practitioners. My officials have participated in a number of events and have noted a number of perspectives from loyalist and republican areas, including from those mentioned by the Deputy.

It is intended that the British Irish Intergovernmental Conference will be convened in the coming weeks and this will be a further opportunity for a discussion on security cooperation between the two Governments, as represented by myself and the Minister for Justice on our part and the NI Secretary of State on behalf of the British Government.

Overseas Development Aid

59. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the actions his Department is taking to support the provision of education in developing countries in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56507/21]

63. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the actions his Department is taking to support the provision of education in developing countries in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56486/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 59 and 63 together.

The COVID-19 pandemic had an unprecedented impact on education across the globe. For public health reasons, 1.6 billion young people were unable to attend school for long periods, and some are still not back in school. These school closures exacerbated existing inequalities, with those children most marginalised before COVID-19 having highest risk of learning losses and permanently dropping out of education.

Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable. Early in the pandemic Ireland, together with Liberia and Trinidad and Tobago, brought together UN member states and thought leaders to discuss the specific impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescent girls' education. The outcome was a series of recommended actions to support adolescent girls in continuing their

education and returning to schools after they reopened.

At a global level and in response to pressing educational needs, I have increased Ireland's financial contributions this year to the Global Partnership for Education (to €10 million) and Education Cannot Wait (to €4 million).

The Global Partnership for Education is helping governments sustain learning and mitigate the impacts of school closures for up to 355 million children in 66 countries. Priority is given to reaching the most vulnerable children, including girls and children with disabilities.

Education Cannot Wait is supporting continuous access to learning and actions to protect the health and wellbeing of girls and boys living in emergencies and protracted crises. Their work targets 32 million vulnerable children and youth in over 30 countries affected by armed conflict, forced displacement, climate-related disasters and other crises.

At country level, Irish Embassies are supporting education ministries make key adjustments to education programmes, to allow for distance and blended learning as well as the safe reopening of schools. This includes provision of home based learning supports, distance education innovations and improving hand-washing facilities in schools. For example, in Mozambique, the Irish Aid supported EducaTV project provides audio-visual and digital science content, which were transmitted on TV and via an online platform reaching millions of teachers and students. While in Uganda last month, I saw an Irish Aid supported UNICEF home based learning support programme in Karamoja province, helping ensure that vulnerable children maintain access to education notwithstanding the duration of school closures in Uganda.

Departmental Communications

60. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the engagement he has had with his counterparts at European Union level regarding the continuation of the EU-Israel Association Agreement particularly in view of Israel's ongoing treatment of the Palestinian people and its human rights obligations under Article 2 of the Association Agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56538/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The human rights situation in the occupied Palestinian territory remains a matter of serious concern.

The protection and promotion of human rights is an integral part of Ireland's foreign policy and we consistently seek to raise our concerns on human rights issues through the most appropriate and effective channels.

It is also an integral part of the EU's external actions and is clearly reflected Article 2 of the EU-Israel Association Agreement which states that respect for human rights and democratic principles are an essential element of the Agreement.

The Association Agreement provides a framework in which the EU can raise concerns on human rights among other issues. I have been clear with my EU Foreign Minister colleagues that we should use all such opportunities to ensure our concerns are registered. The suspension of the Association Agreement would shut down a key avenue for EU influence and engagement and furthermore would not have the support of EU Member States.

We will continue to speak out against actions which are in breach of international law. Ireland conveys our concerns on human rights issues to the Israeli authorities, both directly, which I did during my recent visit to the region, through the EU and at the UN.

Ireland engages in interactive dialogues with the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in the occupied Palestinian territory at the UN General Assembly. In the most recent debate on 25 October we expressed concern at the lack of accountability for possible violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. Ireland also called on Israel to conduct investigations including for incidents of possible excessive use of force by the Israeli Security Forces.

Ireland also provides financial support to Israeli and Palestinian NGOs working on human rights issues.

Departmental Meetings

61. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on his attendance in October 2021 at the 2021 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Ministerial Council meeting. [56378/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Minister of State for European Affairs Thomas Byrne attended the 2021 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Ministerial Council meeting (MCM) on the 5-6th October.

The Ministerial Council Meeting, which was timed to mark the 60th anniversary of the OECD, saw Ministers agree a New Vision Statement and Global Relations Strategy to guide the work of the organisation over the next decade. Also on the agenda was a focus on addressing the medium and long-term challenges facing the global economy, with an emphasis on the green and digital transitions and gender equality.

Three substantive developments emerged from the Ministerial Council Meeting – consideration of enlargement of the OECD, an Inclusive Framework on Implicit and Explicit Carbon Pricing and agreement of a new tax framework to address the tax challenges of digitalisation.

Minister Byrne attended the Members only session, during which the importance of the shared values' of the OECD were reaffirmed and a common vision for the future of the OECD were discussed, later being adopted as the New Vision Statement for the OECD.

During these discussions, Minister Byrne hailed the important contribution of the OECD to multilateralism and the rules based system over its six decades. In pledging support for the New Vision Statement, he highlighted the platform the OECD provides Members to build the prosperity needed to tackle inequalities and meet the needs of our citizens. He urged Members to accept the opportunities and challenges posed by climate and digital transitions in building a sustainable recovery from the pandemic.

Minister Byrne also spoke of the importance of cultivating public trust in Government as a source of truth and authority and pointed to the high vaccine uptake in Ireland as a sign of such public trust. He noted the need to mainstream gender equality by removing social and economic barriers limiting women and girls and to accelerate global co-operation, in particular with developing countries who are more severely impacted by climate change.

Minister Byrne also attended a discussion focused on innovation and inclusive pathways to net-zero.

Departmental Meetings

62. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on his re-

cent visit to the port of Dunkirk for the inauguration of the Irish terminal. [56377/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Minister of State for European Affairs, Thomas Byrne T.D. visited Dunkirk on 10-11 October to participate in the inauguration of the Irish Terminal at the Port of Dunkirk, which is the base for the new DFDS direct maritime link to Rosslare. The main objectives of the visit were to underline the importance of both the direct routes and the landbridge for Ireland's trade connectivity with the Single Market, to reinforce existing strong bilateral relations with France, Ireland's closest EU neighbour, building on our ambitious Joint Plan of Action, and to consolidate relationships with the regional authorities in the Hauts-de-France region

The Dunkirk-Rosslare route opened on 2 January 2021 to cater for freight consignments moving directly from Ireland to mainland Europe and runs ten crossings a week. Dunkirk is a highly strategic location for Ireland's exports to the European continent as it is ideally situated in close proximity to Paris, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. Ireland's freight capacity to continental EU ports has doubled in the past 18 months in response to significant market demand. A number of new or additional direct ferry links with increased capacity have come on stream and are seeing high demand, including to Cherbourg, Dunkirk, Zeebrugge, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Antwerp, Roscoff and Santander. Figures from the Irish Maritime Development Office show that weekly roll-on / roll-off (RoRo) freight capacity to continental EU ports has doubled in the past 18 months and is at unprecedented levels. Similarly, load-on / load-off (LoLo) volumes in the first half of 2021 increased by 10% compared to pre-pandemic levels in 2019, and are at their highest level since 2007. This increase in services demonstrates the commitment of the shipping companies to the Irish market

During the visit, the Minister also visited a manufacturing plant owned by Ecocem, an Irish company situated in the port of Dunkirk that produces high performance cements. Ecocem is one of the leading Irish companies in France that has grown its business through investment in the Hauts-de-France region and the Port of Dunkirk.

In parallel to supporting the development of direct maritime routes, the Minister and the Government continue to support the smooth flow of goods across the UK landbridge, including working closely with French counterparts.

Question No. 63 answered with question No. 59.

Departmental Priorities

64. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will provide an update on the work he and his Department have undertaken to date to evacuate and support Irish citizens and persons with a connection to Ireland from Afghanistan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56289/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): A total of 107 Irish citizens and their dependents have been assisted in evacuating Afghanistan since the crisis broke in mid-August. This included the deployment of an Emergency Civil Assistance Team, which previously helped to evacuate 26 citizens and residents.

My Department, including our Embassies in Abu Dhabi and Ankara, has worked with EU Member States and partners in the region to support the ongoing evacuation efforts. We are appreciative of the continuing cooperation with the Government of Qatar in this regard.

Work is ongoing to support the 12 Irish citizens and their dependents who remain in Af-

ghanistan and wish to leave. My Department has also provided support to established residents, a number of whom were assisted in returning to Ireland.

Separately, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth administers the Irish Refugee Protection Programme. Over 500 Afghan nationals have been granted refugee status under this Programme, with over 300 having returned safely to Ireland. My Department has provided support, including through our Embassy network, in securing safe passage to Ireland for a number of these.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the officials in my Department for the work undertaken to date in providing assistance for those seeking to leave Afghanistan.

Question No. 65 answered orally.

Departmental Programmes

66. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position regarding the continued success of the Irish Fellows Programme which provides educational opportunities in Ireland for persons from developing countries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56487/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy): The Ireland Fellows Programme brings promising mid-career professionals from partner countries to study for a master's-level qualification at a University or Institute of Technology in Ireland.

The programme is run by the Development Cooperation and Africa Division of the Department of Foreign Affairs, which manages and implements the Irish Aid international development programme. Its day-to-day management is undertaken by the Irish Council for International Students.

The programme has operated since 1974, bringing students from African partner countries and, since 2009, from Vietnam. Following a decision to expand the programme in 2019-20, it was enlarged to include students from the occupied Palestinian Territories, and in 2020-2021, from Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

The objective of the Ireland Fellows Programme is to help to build a cohort of people with the potential to become leaders in their home country and contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Courses within the programme are aligned with Ireland's policy for International Development, A Better World. The Fellowship award covers course fees, accommodation, living costs, and flights. The programme promotes gender equality, equal opportunities, and welcomes diversity and alumni are encouraged to stay connected with Ireland, and with each other, after returning home.

There are presently 158 Fellows in Ireland, studying at 18 Higher Education Institutions. The 2021 Fellows are from African partner countries, the occupied Palestinian territory, Vietnam, Laos, and Small Island Developing States in the Caribbean, Pacific, Africa and Asia.

The process of selecting Fellows for the 2022-23 academic year is underway and is expected to conclude in June 2022.

Question No. 67 answered with question No. 22.

Question No. 68 answered with question No. 22.

Question No. 69 answered with question No. 22.

Question No. 70 answered orally.

Departmental Meetings

71. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position regarding his meeting with the French Secretary of State for European Affairs in October 2021. [56379/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): As part of my work on deepening the extensive and important partnership between Ireland and France, I have met my French counterpart, Minister for European and Foreign Affairs, Mr. Jean-Yves Le Drian, on many occasions including at meetings of the Foreign Affairs Council. I also met him during the visit of President Macron to Ireland in August of this year.

I last had a formal meeting with the Secretary of State for European Affairs, Clément Beaune, when he accompanied Minister Le Drian on a visit to Ireland last May. I also met him during the visit of President Macron in August. I did not meet Secretary of State Beaune in October. However, Minister of State for European Affairs, Thomas Byrne T.D. met with Secretary of State Beaune in Paris on October 5th , ahead of the 2021 OECD Ministerial Council Meeting.

At the meeting, they discussed major current issues on the EU agenda, including EU-UK relations. The two Ministers also focused on the upcoming French presidency of the Council of the EU and the Conference on the Future of Europe. As European Affairs Minister of the incoming EU presidency, Minister Beaune will play a vital role as Co-Chair of the Executive Board overseeing the Conference on the Future of Europe next spring.

Ireland enjoys very warm relations with France. The visit of President Macron to Ireland, in August, was a strong signal of the ever stronger bilateral relations being forged between our countries. As part of that visit, the French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and I signed a Joint Plan of Action between our two countries. This is an ambitious plan which will deepen practical cooperation across a number of sectors. It will bring tangible benefits for our businesses, schools, higher education institutions and research institute, cultural institutions, as well as ordinary citizens.

In the period ahead, my Department will be working to deliver on the priorities outlined in this Joint Plan. We also look forward to working with our French counterparts during their Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Departmental Meetings

72. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on his attendance at the recent General Affairs Council of the European Union; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56298/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Thomas Byrne): I attended the most recent meeting of the General Affairs Council which took place on 19 October 2021 in Luxembourg.

The principal item for discussion at the Council was the preparation of the agenda for the European Council meeting, which took place on the 21st and 22nd of October. At that meeting, Leaders discussed energy prices and migration. There were also discussions on the Covid-19

pandemic, digital issues including the 2030 Digital Compass and trade. In addition, the European Council prepared for the ASEM summit on 25/26 November and the Eastern Partnership summit on 15 December, as well as taking stock of preparations for the upcoming meetings of COP26 on climate change and of COP15 on biological diversity.

There was also an exchange of views at the Council on the annual rule of law dialogue. In my remarks on this important agenda item, I reiterated that the rule of law is a fundamental principle for all EU Member States and that it is of vital importance that the rule of law is preserved, protected, and promoted across the Union.

The General Affairs Council also discussed the Conference on the Future of Europe, in advance of the second Conference Plenary session which took place in Strasbourg on 23 October. At the Council, I briefed my Ministerial colleagues on our own national programme of events to date and discussed how we can promote greater public engagement with the Conference in the coming months.

Under Any Other Business, Ministers received an update from the Slovenian Presidency on the outcome of the international conference "Illusive Reconciliation: Transitional Processes in Central and Eastern Europe in a Comparative Perspective", which was held on 23 August in Ljubljana. *Question Nos. 73 to 79, inclusive, answered orally.*

Departmental Meetings

80. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Defence if he will report on his attendance at the 2021 annual delegate conference of an association (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56485/21]

86. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Defence if he will provide details on his recent attendance at the annual delegate conference of an association (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56577/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 80 and 86 together.

I was delighted to have had the opportunity to attend and speak at PDFORRA's Annual Delegate Conference in early October of this year. I used the occasion to address a number of key issues which are important for PDFORRA members.

I raised the important issue of inappropriate behaviour in the workplace. I provided the delegates with an update on the most recent actions that I have undertaken and reiterated the point that inappropriate behaviour cannot and will not be tolerated in the Defence Forces. I briefed the Conference on the roll out of the Confidential Contact Person (CCP) who has been appointed to provide professional, safe and confidential support for any past or present member of the Defence Forces, who may wish to report alleged bullying, harassment, sexual harassment or discrimination.

I provided an update on the current status of the work of the Commission on Defence Forces. I advised the delegates to the Conference that I expect the recommendations arising out of the report of the Commission will be far reaching and challenging and their implementation will require positive and constructive engagement from PDFORRA and members.

I informed delegates that I was delighted to note the Association's favourable ballot on the public service agreement 2021-2022 - "Building Momentum". This has provided for further

increases in pay and allowances for members of PDFORRA in accordance with the terms of the agreement

I acknowledged the contribution of PDFORRA to the negotiations on the review of Technician Pay Grades 2-6.

I spoke about the review of contracts of service for personnel enlisted to the Permanent Defence Force post 1994, which is a key issue for not only PDFORRA members, but also for me as Minister for Defence. The review has been completed and officials in the Department of Defence are consulting with officials from the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform in respect of cost and pension implications arising from the recommendations in the Review.

Regarding the Working Time Directive, I informed PDFORRA delegates that the Government is committed to bringing the Defence Forces within the scope of the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997.

I thanked delegates and all Defence Force members, on behalf of Government and the people of Ireland, for the support that they have provided to the Health Service, in particular, in response to the national effort to combat COVID-19.

All of the above issues are being progressed through my Department and where appropriate through the Conciliation and Arbitration Scheme for members of the Permanent Defence Force. I look forward to further continued constructive engagement with the Defence Forces Representative Associations.

Question No. 81 answered orally.

Question No. 82 answered orally.

Defence Forces

83. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Defence the status of plans to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the battle of Jadotville; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56532/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The issue of awarding of Military Medals for Gallantry (MMG) and Distinguished Service Medals (DSMs) to a number of personnel who served in Jadotville in September 1961 has been considered on a number of occasions over the years and a range of actions have taken place to give due recognition to the courage and bravery of all the members of "A" Company, 35th Infantry Battalion who were served at Jadotville in 1961.

Notwithstanding the actions that have been taken to date to recognise and honour the valiant actions and bravery of all of the men stationed at Jadotville sixty years ago, an Independent Review Group (IRG) was established to examine and report on matters relating to recommendations for military medals relating to events at Jadotville.

In July, 2021, the IRG made a number of recommendations in their report including a recommendation that the 60th anniversary of Jadotville be commemorated. Other recommendations relate to the awarding of medals, veterans affairs and honouring the role of families and the support they provided to veterans. All recommendations have been considered at a high level.

Last September, the Secretary General of the Department of Defence, and the then Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces marked the 60th anniversary of Jadotville by paying tribute to the extraordinary courage, skill, commitment and sacrifice of the men of 'A' Company, 35th Infantry Battalion when attending the peacekeeping memorial event at UNHQ New York.

The Deputy may also wish to be aware that Military Archives has an online exhibition marking the 60th Anniversary of the battle at Jadotville on its website www.militaryarchives.ie.

With regard to planning for an appropriate specific commemorative event to mark the 60th anniversary of Jadotville and which would also honour the families of the Jadotville veterans, a judicial review related to a recommendation of the IRG report is under way at present. As a result, planning for an appropriate commemorative event is paused until the Defence Organisation has legal clarity on implementing the recommendations of the IRG Report.

Question No. 84 answered orally.

Defence Forces

85. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence the number of new recruits that have enlisted in the Reserve Defence Forces to date in 2021; when the next recruitment campaign will take place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56381/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The COVID-19 pandemic has had a very significant impact on Defence Forces recruitment, including to the Reserve Defence Force (RDF) and has resulted in a reduction of most collective induction processing and training activities. The pandemic resulted in the enactment of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (COVID-19) Act 2020 and the subsequent delays in Defence Forces applicant processing are now being addressed, including for RDF applicants.

The Military Authorities have advised that a revised Defence Forces framework for living with COVID -19 is in place and is reviewed on an ongoing basis. This revised framework, I understand, affords more scope for RDF training and induction within the parameters of Government guidelines. This of course, will be subject to continued guidance from Government on easing of restrictions.

While the Government remains committed to restoring the strength of the RDF, given the competing recruitment demands at present, where PDF recruitment is and should remain a priority, it should be noted that the same personnel and resources are utilised for both PDF and RDF recruitment.

Nonetheless, RDF recruitment will also be progressed to the greatest extent possible and an additional 29 new RDF members have been inducted as at the end of October this year, with 17 inducted into the AR and 12 inducted into the NSR.

I also had the pleasure this week of attending a Commissioning Ceremony where a cohort of 29 officers were newly commissioned into the Army Reserve. These 29 personnel, men and women, received their commissions following their successful graduation from a Potential Officers Course.

Additionally, I understand that measures are currently under consideration by the military authorities with a view to streamlining elements of the induction process. The outcome of a pilot initiative in this regard is awaited and will further inform next steps.

In recent years the Defence Forces have advertised AR and NSR recruitment competitions on a twice yearly basis, in spring and autumn, through all social media platforms, websites and the national newspapers. The military authorities have advised that they propose to launch a recruitment competition for the RDF in early 2022.

Question No. 86 answered with question No. 80.

Air Corps

87. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Defence when the replacement aircraft for the current Casa CN 235 maritime patrol aircraft will arrive; if he is satisfied with Ireland's current capacity to patrol its maritime territory; if he has plans to further expand the Air Corps capacity to patrol territorial waters; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56539/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Air Corps Maritime Patrol Squadron carries out aerial surveillance of territorial waters using the two CASA CN 235 maritime patrol aircraft. These aircraft are equipped with state-of-the-art surveillance and communication equipment which offers aerial assistance to the Naval Service in patrolling the Irish Exclusive Economic Zone.

My priority as Minister for Defence is to ensure that the operational capability of the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service is maintained and developed. The principal aim over the period of the White Paper is to replace and upgrade, as required, capabilities in order to retain a flexible response for a wide range of operational requirements.

The White Paper on Defence has identified and prioritised the need for capital investment on a broad range of replacement defensive equipment programmes and on upgrading the Defence Forces built infrastructure. Defence has received a capital allocation under the National Development Plan of €566m over the 2022-2025 timeframe. Within that capital allocation the Defence annual capital budget for 2022 is €141m.

In relation to air-based capability, three Pilatus PC-12 aircraft in the Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) role have been acquired. An additional PC-12 was also acquired in response to the Covid 19 situation. A contract for the supply of two C295 Maritime Patrol Aircraft was signed with Airbus Defence and Space in December 2019. Some €276 million, including VAT, has been committed to the acquisition of all of these enhanced capabilities.

The larger Airbus C295 MPA's are more capable aircraft which will enhance maritime surveillance and provide a greater degree of utility for transport and cargo carrying tasks. The two Airbus C295 maritime patrol aircraft due for delivery in 2023.

The Government established an independent Commission on the Defence Forces in December 2020, with a mandate to report within 12 months. The work of the Commission encompasses the consideration of appropriate capabilities, structures and staffing, and their report will inform decisions regarding the future development of the Defence Forces.

Ports Policy

88. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Defence the details of discussions he has held with Drogheda Port in respect of the proposed deep-water port development at a site at Bremore; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56292/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I wish to advise the Deputy that officials from my Department met with Drogheda Port officials, at their request, earlier this year. At this meeting, the officials from Drogheda Port outlined in broad terms their intentions to develop the port facilities at Bremore which according to the Port authority would entail the full acquisition of my Department's land holding at the Gormanstown facility.

I am advised that this meeting, which was also attended by the military authorities, involved a frank exchange of views, during which it was outlined by my officials that the Gormanstown facility is and will remain a strategic Defence Forces asset and that it was not available for acquisition. In fact, the use of this military facility has grown in importance for training purposes and the increased level of usage can be expected to continue in the coming years. As the only operational training camp on the East coast, Gormanstown Camp continues to be essential to the Defence Forces. While my Department will enter into further discussions on the matter if requested to do so, I want to make it clear that it is not intended to transfer or dispose of any aspect of this important land bank.

Air Corps

89. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Defence his plans to purchase training jets for the Air Corps; and the locations in which they will be stationed. [56318/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): My priority as Minister for Defence is to ensure that the operational capability of the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service is maintained and developed. This is to enable the Defence Forces to carry out the roles assigned by Government, as set out in the White Paper on Defence. Equipment priorities for the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service are being considered in the context of the lifetime of the White Paper on Defence as part of the capability development and Equipment Development Planning (EDP) process.

In this context, the principal aim over the period of the White Paper is to replace and upgrade, as required, capabilities in order to retain a flexible response for a wide range of operational requirements at home and overseas. The Department of Defence has received a capital allocation under the National Development Plan of €566m over the 2022-2025 timeframe. Within that capital allocation the Defence annual capital budget for 2022 is €141m. This will enable continued investment in defence equipment, including major platforms, and barracks infrastructure.

In relation to air-based capability, my immediate priorities have been the acquisition of three Pilatus PC-12 aircraft in the Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) role and to acquire two Airbus C295 maritime patrol aircraft. An additional PC-12 was also acquired in response to the Covid 19 situation. A contract for the supply of two C295 Maritime Patrol Aircraft was signed with Airbus Defence and Space in December 2019, with delivery of the aircraft expected in 2023. Some €276 million, including VAT, has been committed to the acquisition of all of these enhanced capabilities.

There are currently has no plans to purchase training jets. The Pilatus PC9 aircraft, which entered into service in 2004, is the Air Corps trainer aircraft, as well as contributing to other military roles. The Equipment Development Plan provides for a mid-life refit of these aircraft.

The Deputy will be aware that the Government established an independent Commission on the Defence Forces in December 2020, with a mandate to report within 12 months. The work of the Commission encompasses the consideration of appropriate military equipment capabilities,

structures and staffing, and their report will inform decisions regarding the future development of the Defence Forces.

I am satisfied that the Defence Forces have a modern and effective range of equipment which is line with best international standards, to enable them to meet operational requirements.

Question No. 90 answered orally.

Defence Forces

91. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the review of the central recruitment that has taken place regarding the ongoing recruitment issues highlighted in both the press and at committee by the Reserve Defence Forces representatives; and the outcome in terms of improving the pathways to becoming a member of the Reserve Defence Forces. [56519/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The White Paper on Defence is clear that there is a continued requirement to retain and develop the Reserve Defence Force (RDF).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a very significant impact on Defence Forces recruitment, including to the Reserve Defence Force (RDF) and has resulted in a pause to most collective induction processing and training activities.

The Military Authorities have advised me that a revised Defence Forces General Framework for Living with Covid-19 is now in place, based on the recent easing of Government restrictions. This revised framework is reviewed by the Joint Operational Planning Group (JOPG) on a regular basis and facilitates the commencement of the RDF Induction Process, with planned induction training to commence shortly. This of course, will be subject to continued guidance from Government on easing of restrictions.

Additionally, I understand that measures are currently under consideration by the military authorities with a view to streamlining elements of the induction process. The outcome of a pilot initiative in this regard is awaited and will further inform next steps.

While the Government remains committed to restoring the strength of the RDF, given the competing recruitment demands at present, where PDF recruitment is and should remain a priority, it should be noted that the same personnel and resources are utilised for both PDF and RDF recruitment. Nonetheless, RDF recruitment will be progressed to the greatest extent possible. An additional 29 new RDF members have been inducted as at the end of October this year, with 17 inducted into the AR and 12 inducted into the NSR.

I was also delighted last week to attend a Commissioning Ceremony where a cohort of 29 officers were newly commissioned into the Army Reserve.

Separately the Deputy will be aware that the Independent Commission on the Defence Forces, which is due to report at the end of the year, is also expected to include proposals on the role and contribution of the RDF. I look forward to receiving this Report.

I wish to assure the Deputy that the Government appreciates the service of the Reserve Defence Force and recognises its important contribution to Ireland's defence capability.

Question No. 92 answered orally.

Question No. 93 answered orally.

Defence Forces

94. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence the number of new recruits that have enlisted in the Permanent Defence Forces to date in 2021; when the next recruitment campaign will take place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56380/21]

99. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the number of women at all ranks currently in the Army, Naval Service and Air Corps; the extent to which ongoing recruitment exists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56458/21]

109. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Defence the work being done to increase the number of members of the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56187/21]

112. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Defence the number of members recruited to the Defence Forces to date in 2021; the number that have left; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56483/21]

117. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Defence the number of persons that have left the Permanent Defence Forces to date in 2021; the number of new recruits there have been over the same period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56500/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 94, 99, 109, 112 and 117 together.

The strength of the Permanent Defence Force (PDF), as at 31st October 2021, is 8,572 of which 601 are female. The detailed breakdown of the female strength requested will be provided separately.

[<ahref=”https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-11-18_pq94-18-11-21_en.xlsx “>Strength v establishment]

[<ahref=”https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-11-18_pq94a-18-11-21_en.xlsx “>Female Strength]

As of the same date, 541 personnel left the PDF. Personnel leave the Permanent Defence Force for a number of reasons including on age grounds, at the end of contract and voluntary discharges.

As at 15th November, 577 personnel (including 455 General Service Recruits) have been inducted into the Defence Forces. This arises from the ongoing General Service recruitment campaign and the expanding scope of direct entry competitions, along with reviews of direct entry terms and conditions to improve intakes. The scope of direct entry competitions was expanded in 2021, from 10 competitions, to include a new Air Corps Aircraft Technician competition. Additionally, direct entry terms and conditions continue to be revised to improve intakes. The re-entry campaign for former members of the PDF continues.

There has been significant progress on pay arising out of increases due from recent pay agreements, the most recent of which was a 1% increase on annualised salaries or €500, whichever is greater, on the 1st October 2021, with further increases to follow. There are now Service Commitment schemes in both the Air Corps and the Naval Service, and a Special Naval Service tax credit for sea-going personnel.

Furthermore, in light of the particular challenges faced by the Defence Sector, the Government tasked the Public Service Pay Commission (PSPC) to undertake a comprehensive review

and analysis of underlying difficulties in recruitment and retention in the Defence Forces. I am confident that the pay benefits delivered by the Public Service pay agreements, in tandem with the implementation of the PSPC's recommendations will improve recruitment and retention challenges currently being experienced by the PDF.

Additionally, the Commission on the Defence Forces is due to submit their report by the end of the year and I look forward to receiving the report in due course. The recommendations will then be fully considered and will inform future decisions regarding the Defence Forces.

I remain committed to maximising recruitment and retention of personnel to maintain the capacity of the Defence Forces to operate effectively across all roles and to undertake the tasks laid down by Government, both at home and abroad.

Emergency Planning

95. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Defence the role of the Office of Emergency Planning as it relates to dealing with extreme weather events in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56575/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Office of Emergency Planning (OEP) is a joint civil military office which supports me in my role as Chair of the Government Task Force on Emergency Planning. The Government Task Force coordinates emergency management policy across Government Departments and Agencies. The OEP acts as a focal point in matters of emergency planning and risk assessment and also acts to improve coordination of emergency planning across the various Departments and Agencies. The OEP manages the National Emergency Coordination Centre in Dublin which is available in the event that a Lead Government Department convenes the National Emergency Coordination Group.

The *Strategic Emergency Management National Structures and Framework,* approved by Government in July 2017, outlines the Lead Government Department principle and how this is applied across a "whole of Government" approach to managing responses to emergencies. In the case of severe weather emergencies, the Framework identifies the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage as the lead Government Department for such emergencies. In this regard the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage would collect information on severe weather and bring it to the attention of the Government Task Force, as appropriate.

Also of note is that the Government Task Force adopted a Strategic Emergency Management Guideline on Climate Change Adaptation in December 2020. This guidance document is aimed at Lead Government Departments to aid them in linking their emergency planning with the National Climate Adaptation Framework, which is led and coordinated by the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications.

Defence Forces

96. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Defence his plans to commit Irish personnel to serve in MINURSO. [56578/21]

134. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Defence the reason Ireland has withdrawn two officers from the MINURSO mission in Western Sahara; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56549/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 96 and 134 together.

In July this year, the decision was taken to withdraw the two Defence Forces' personnel deployed to the MINURSO mission. This followed a review of current overseas deployments and a proposal from the General Staff. The withdrawal of the personnel arose from a need identified by the General Staff to consolidate current operational deployments in the context of additional commitments by Ireland in recent years to peacekeeping operations including UNDOF, MINUSMA, EUTM Mali and EU CSDP Operation IRINI.

I can assure the Deputy that Ireland remains a strong supporter of the United Nations role and its engagement in the Western Sahara, including the role played by the MINURSO mission.

The Department of Defence and the Defence Forces constantly review the deployment of Irish personnel overseas. Any decision with regard to future deployments of Defence Forces personnel, including any possible return to MINURSO, would have to be considered by reference to a number of other considerations, including the resourcing of the mission and the level of existing commitments to other peacekeeping operations and security requirements at home.

Defence Forces

97. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Defence the efforts being made by him and his Department to address the retention of post-1994 personnel some of whom face discharge from the Defences Forces in December 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56583/21]

107. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Defence the status of discussions with an organisation (details supplied) on the recommendations to resolve the issue of post-1994 contracts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56300/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 97 and 107 together.

Military life places unique demands on individuals and it is necessary that Defence Forces personnel are prepared to meet the challenges of all military operations. For this reason compulsory retirement ages for ranks in the Permanent Defence Force are considerably lower than in other employments.

The age and fitness profile of the Permanent Defence Force have been the subject of a number of reviews. A range of policies were introduced to ensure an appropriate age profile and levels of fitness. This included fixed term contracts for certain ranks enlisted from 1994 onwards.

Arising from an adjudication in 2015, it was agreed that a further review of contracts of service for Line Corporals and Privates and Corporals in receipt of Technical Pay 1 and 2 would be conducted. It was subsequently agreed with PDFORRA that all Privates and Corporals recruited post 1994, would be allowed to continue in service to 31 December 2022 (or until they reach the age of 50), provided these personnel meet certain criteria during the interim period, including medical grades and fitness tests.

This agreement was also extended to include post 1994 Sergeants, who also can continue to serve to the same date, subject to their meeting similar criteria in the interim period. These measures are in place to provide time for the review to be completed.

A joint civil/military review of mandatory retirement ages of all ranks in the Permanent

Defence Force has been conducted. The review has taken into account the Report of the Public Service Pay Commission on recruitment and retention in the Permanent Defence Force, which included in their recommendations, the need to consider options to tackle barriers to extended participation in the Permanent Defence Force.

The recommendations in the joint civil/military review requires consideration from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, in relation to implications on costs and pensions. Discussions with PDFORRA on the recommendations will take place following the consultation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

I have said previously that I want to provide clarity on this issue before the end of the year. This is not solely my nor my Department's decision. We have to work with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform as well. Nonetheless that is a commitment I have given and I want to follow through on it.

Question No. 98 answered orally.

Question No. 99 answered with question No. 94.

Defence Forces

100. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Defence if he will report on the efforts being made by his Department to encourage and increase diversity in the ranks of the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56185/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I believe it is critically important that the Defence Forces reflects the modern demographics of today's Irish society. To that end, the Defence Forces is committed to supporting a diverse workforce through its various policies and strategies.

The Defence Forces Diversity and Inclusion Strategy Statement and Action Plan, launched in 2016, commits to an inclusive workplace environment where dignity and respect are afforded to all. In addition, the Defence Forces comply with the legal provisions of the Gender Recognition Act, 2015.

A number of initiatives with a particular focus on diversity in communications have already been implemented with a view to increasing the diversity of Defence Forces personnel. These include:

- Information on Defence Forces careers provided to cultural, religious and ethnic groups throughout Ireland via the Irish Centre for Diversity;

- Schools receive briefs on careers in the Defence Forces on an ongoing basis and this is coordinated and conducted by Brigades and Formations;

- The Defence Forces website also includes an education piece on Gender, Equality and Diversity;

- And 2020 also saw a review of the Defence Force's Diversity and Inclusion Strategy Statement and Action Plan which provided recommendations for the development of the strategy into the future.

The Defence Forces' approach to diversity and inclusion is also anchored in the White Paper on Defence 2015. A number of projects were identified with a view to ensuring that the Defence

Organisation was reflective of Irish society and its changing nature.

Other measures which support the Defence Force's commitment to a workplace underpinned by diversity and inclusion include the following:

- Both the Department and the Defence Forces, are represented on a Committee, led by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth established to oversee and monitor progress on the implementation of the National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy 2019-2021.

- Additionally, the Defence Forces LGBTQI+ Network "Defend with Pride" was launched in October 2016 with the aim of providing support, information and guidance for LGBT personnel and allies who wish to support colleagues, family and friends. The Defence Forces were subsequently winners of the HR Leadership & Management Awards 2020 for 'Best Public Sector Initiative'.

- A Joint Civil/Military working group was established in 2019, to progress the of Transgender Employment Policy for the Defence Forces. This work is continuing.

- The Defence Forces participated in Dublin Pride for the first time in 2018 and contributed to the 2020 virtual Pride Parade in the form of a virtual pride message from the Chair of Defence with Pride, the Defence Forces LGBTQI+ and Allies Network and a message of support and solidarity from the Chaplaincy Service led by the Head Chaplain.

- In addition, the Defence Forces and my Department, also contributed to 'Our Public Service 2020 Action 16', which aims to promote equality, diversity and inclusion, across the Public Sector.

I am satisfied that through its various policies and strategies, the Defence Forces with the support of my Department, is committed to supporting a diverse workforce reflecting the Ireland of today.

Departmental Priorities

101. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Defence if his Department has carried out a threat assessment in relation to Belarus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56547/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The situation at the Belarussian border has escalated further and presents a significant challenge for Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, but also more broadly to the European Union as a whole. The situation in Belarus was discussed earlier this week by EU Foreign and Defence Ministers and is clearly very serious. Ministers expressed solidarity with Polish, Latvian and Lithuanian colleagues at the meeting.

At the Foreign Affairs Council on Monday, EU Foreign Ministers, myself included, discussed the escalation in the crisis along the EU's borders with Belarus. We took swift action and agreed to broaden the listings criteria for sanctions on the Belarusian regime.

The EU is continuing to monitor developments in Belarus and at the border very closely. It is likely that the Council will come back to the issue in due course and on the basis of the most up-to-date information available.

Ireland has repeatedly demonstrated our solidarity with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, and with those trapped at the border. Just three weeks ago, Minister of State Byrne visited the Lithuanian-Belarussian border, accompanied by members of the Lithuanian Government. As

part of that visit, he viewed some migrant camps that have been established by the Lithuanian Government, met with the Lithuanian Border Guards and also with the Lithuanian Red Cross, which, this year, has received a contribution of €100,000 from Irish Aid to help provide relief to the migrants.

Threat assessments carried out by the Defence Forces relate primarily to those locations and theatres where Defence Forces personnel are deployed on operations. Given the intelligence and security issues involved in such assessments, it would be inappropriate for me to comment further on the matter at this time.

Question No. 102 answered orally.

Departmental Funding

103. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Defence the estimate allocation for Defence in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56409/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The total gross allocation provided to the Defence Sector in Budget 2022 is €1,107 million, comprising of €836 million for Vote 36 (Defence) and €271 million for Vote 35 (Army Pensions). This allocation represents an overall increase of €35 million on 2021 and ensures that sufficient funding is available to the Defence Organisation to carry out all its assigned roles, both at home and overseas and to deliver on White Paper commitments.

The Defence Vote provides for pay and non-pay current expenditure of some €695 million. The pay allocation of €545 million provides for the pay and allowances of over 10,400 public service employees within the Defence Sector, including a Permanent Defence Force of up to 9,500, along with civil servants and civilian employees employed by my Department. The non-pay allocation of €150 million provides for expenditure on essential and ongoing Defence Forces standing and operational costs including utilities, fuel, catering, maintenance, information technology and training.

The White Paper on Defence, updated in 2019, highlighted the importance of capability development and the necessity for continued renewal, upgrade and acquisition of military equipment and infrastructure. To this end, the capital allocation of €141 million provided for 2022 will facilitate the ongoing programme of equipment replacement and infrastructural development, as set out in the Defence Equipment Development Plan and the Defence Forces Built Infrastructure Programme.

Civil Defence and the Irish Red Cross Society will also receive funding from the Defence Vote in 2022.

The 2022 allocation for Vote 35 (Army Pensions) is some €271 million, an increase of €8 million on 2021. This allocation ensures that sufficient funding is available to meet the retirement benefits of some 12,750 former members of the Defence Forces and certain dependants.

I welcome the outcome of Budget 2022 and the significant funding envelope of over one billion euro provided to the Defence Sector which will enable the Defence Organisation to continue implementing its organisational priorities into 2022. The Commission on the Defence Forces is due to report by the end of this year and will make recommendations which will inform decisions regarding the future development of the Defence Forces. I look forward to receiving the report.

Defence Forces

104. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence the progress to provide a new cadet school at the Defence Forces Training Centre in the Curragh; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56497/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am pleased to advise the Deputy that tenders for the provision of a new Cadet school in the Defence Forces Training Centre are currently being examined with a view to a contractor being awarded the contracts in the coming weeks. I am advised that subject to contract award, the project should commence construction in early 2022.

Defence Forces

105. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Defence if he has had recent engagement with the representative organisations from the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56479/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Since my appointment as Minister for Defence, in 2020, I have met with the Representative Association for Commissioned Officers (RACO) on four occasions: 17 July 2020, 20 October 2020, 17 December 2020 and 13 October 2021. I have met with the Permanent Defence Force Other Ranks Representative Association (PDFORRA) on five occasions: 17 July 2020, 20 October 2020, 17 December 2020, 24 May 2021 and most recently on 13 October 2021.

I was delighted to be given the opportunity to attend and speak at PDFORRA's Annual Delegate Conference (ADC) on 6 October 2021. I welcome the opportunity to attend and speak at RACO's Biennial Delegate Conference on 23 November 2021.

I look forward to further continued constructive engagement with the Defence Forces Representative Associations. I will continue to engage with the Representative Associations on matters that fall within the scope of their representation.

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106. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Defence his plans to expand the Defence Forces remit in the area of cyber-security. [56408/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): My colleague Minister Ryan, as Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications, has overall responsibility for cyber security at a national level. The National Cyber Security Centre in his Department is the national response authority for cyber security incidents. But, of course, response to cyber threats is a whole-of-Government challenge with inputs in the security domain from An Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces.

The primary responsibility of the Defence Forces relates to the defence and security of their own networks and systems. However, as in any emergency situation, once Defence systems are supported, the Department of Defence and Defence Forces provide support to the National Cyber Security Centre. For example, during the recent cyberattack on the HSE, the Defence Forces supported the response to it including provision of operational support to the HSE and, in particular, logistical and organisational support.

The Department of Defence and the Defence Forces are committed to participating, under the leadership of the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications, in the delivery of measures to improve the Cyber Security of the State. This is being done in line with the Programme for Government commitment to implement the National Cyber Security Strategy, recognizing the potential and important role of the Defence Forces.

To this end, officials from the Department of Defence and members of the Defence Forces are actively involved in implementing the National Cyber Security Strategy such as through secondment of an officer to the Cyber Security Centre of Excellence in Estonia and departmental membership of the Inter-Departmental Committee overseeing implementation of the National Cyber Security Strategy.

This Inter-Departmental Committee has recently been charged with the additional work of overseeing the plan to significantly expand the National Cyber Security Centre so that it can further develop its competence and capacity to help defend and protect IT systems and key services into the future.

For operational security reasons, no public comment will be made regarding Defence Forces Cyber Capability but I would note that the establishment of an independent Commission on the Defence Forces underpins the Government's commitment to ensuring that the Defence Forces are fit for purpose, both in terms of meeting immediate requirements and also in terms of seeking to develop a longer term vision beyond 2030. Amongst the issues that the Commission is examining are Defence Force capabilities, structures and staffing in a number of areas. The Commission is due to submit their report by the end of the year and I look forward to receiving the report in due course. The recommendations will then be fully considered and will inform future decisions regarding the Defence Forces.

Question No. 107 answered with question No. 97.

Naval Service

108. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence his plans to review patrol allowances for the Naval Service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56499/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Conciliation and Arbitration (C&A) scheme for members of the Permanent Defence Force provides a formal mechanism for the Permanent Defence Force Representative Associations, that is RACO (in respect of Commissioned Officers) and PDFORRA (in respect of other ranks), to bring forward claims for improvements in the remuneration and terms and conditions for their members.

At present a claim for an increase in Patrol Duty Allowance is currently before Conciliation Council. As discussions under the C&A scheme are confidential to the parties involved, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on the matter, at this time.

Question No. 109 answered with question No. 94.

Question No. 110 answered with question No. 82.

Defence Forces

111. **Deputy Cathal Berry** asked the Minister for Defence his plans to apply for a supplementary budget estimate in anticipation of the forthcoming report of the Commission on the

Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56306/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Programme for Government committed to an independent Commission to undertake a comprehensive review of the Defence Forces. This independent Commission on the Defence Forces was subsequently established by Government in December 2020, with a mandate to report within 12 months. The Government also approved the Terms of Reference, based on the Programme for Government, and the membership of the Commission. The Commission's overall approach will be guided and informed by both the White Paper on Defence 2015 and the White Paper Update 2019. The work of the Commission will inform the future development of the Defence Forces and encompasses the following matters;

Structure and size of the Defence Forces encompassing consideration of appropriate capabilities, structures and staffing. - Leveraging the capabilities of the Reserve Defence Force in their supports to the Permanent Defence Force and make service in the RDF more attractive.

- Governance and high level command and control structures in the Defence Forces.

- The evolution of remuneration systems and structures in the Defence Forces.

- A strategic perspective on HR policies and associated strategies, recruitment, retention and career progression.

The establishment of the independent Commission on the Defence Forces underpins the Government's commitment to ensuring that the Defence Forces are fit for purpose, both in terms of meeting immediate requirements and also in terms of seeking to develop a longer term vision beyond 2030.

The Commission is due to submit their report by the end of the year and I look forward to receiving the report in due course. The recommendations will then be fully considered and will inform future decisions, including those relating to funding, regarding the Defence Forces.

Question No. 112 answered with question No. 94.

Departmental Funding

113. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Defence the level of capital funding for the upgrade and modernisation of military equipment with a focus on the funding provided in Budget 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56190/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The White Paper on Defence (2015) and the 2019 White Paper update, highlighted the importance of capability development and the necessity for continued renewal, upgrade and acquisition of defence military equipment and infrastructure.

As part of Project Ireland 2040, the National Development Plan (NDP) set out the Government's overarching investment strategy and capital budget for the period 2021-2030. In this context, the National Development Plan allocated multi-annual capital funding of €566 million to the Department of Defence out to 2025, with an allocation of €141 million provided for 2022.

Many of the defence equipment projects are complex, multi-annual and have long lead-in times, so the funding certainty provided by the National Development Plan is particularly welcome. This will enable Defence to plan, prioritise and deliver on scheduled projects over the coming years. All suitable Defence Programmes/Projects, are considered as part of an internal

Civil Military equipment development and infrastructure planning prioritisation process at the relevant time in the context of the prevailing capital envelope provided by the National Development Plan.

Among the major Defence Equipment upgrade and replacement programmes set to be prioritised over the coming years are:

- The Land Forces Capability Development and Force Protection Programmes, including an upgrade of the military transport fleet and next generation radio communications and signal equipment;

- The ongoing Naval Service Vessel Renewal and Replacement Programme, which includes the mid-life refit of the P50 Class of Naval Vessel and the progression of the Multi Role Vessel project;

- The ongoing Air Corps Aircraft Renewal and Replacement Programme which includes the purchase of the C295 Maritime Patrol Aircraft.

This funding will also enable a significant number of Defence infrastructural projects to advance under the Defence Forces Built Infrastructure Programme, including the:

- Provision of a new Cadet School in DFTC, Curragh Co Kildare;

- Provision of a New Military Medical Facility for the Defence Forces at Casement Aerodrome, Baldonnel, Co. Dublin;

- Upgrades to accommodation facilities in various military locations throughout the country such as Collins Barracks, Cork, McKee Barracks, Dublin and the Naval Base, Haulbowline.

The capital investment provided for the Defence Sector in the National Development Plan emphasises the importance attached by the Government to ensuring that the Defence Forces have the necessary capabilities to deliver on the roles assigned by Government.

Defence Forces

114. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Defence further to Parliamentary Question No. 373 of 15 September 2021, the efforts being made by his Department to increase the strength of the Reserve Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56186/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The White Paper on Defence is clear that there is a continued requirement to retain and develop the Reserve Defence Force (RDF). A key ongoing challenge for the RDF is to recruit and retain personnel and I am aware that there continues to be a shortfall between the current strength figures and those of the establishment.

As outlined in the previous PQ referred to, the regulatory establishment of the Army Reserve (AR) and Naval Service Reserve (NSR) is 4,069 personnel, as provided for in Defence Force Regulation CS4. The current effective strength is 1,504 personnel, as of 31 October 2021. The strength of the First Line Reserve at that date is 263 personnel.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a very significant impact on Defence Forces recruitment, including to the RDF and has resulted in a reduction of most collective induction processing and training activities. The pandemic resulted in the enactment of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (COVID-19) Act 2020 and the subsequent delays in Defence Forces appli-

cant processing are now being addressed, including for RDF applicants.

The Military Authorities have advised that a revised Defence Forces framework for living with COVID -19 is in place and is reviewed on an ongoing basis. This revised framework, I understand, affords more scope for RDF training and induction within the parameters of Government guidelines. This of course, will be subject to continued guidance from Government on easing of restrictions.

While the Government remains committed to restoring the strength of the RDF, given the competing recruitment demands at present, where Permanent Defence Force (PDF) recruitment is and should remain a priority, it should be noted that the same personnel and resources are utilised for both PDF and RDF recruitment.

Nonetheless, RDF recruitment will also be progressed to the greatest extent possible and an additional 29 new RDF members have been inducted as at the end of October this year, with 17 inducted into the AR and 12 inducted into the NSR.

I also had the pleasure this week of attending a Commissioning Ceremony where a cohort of 29 officers were newly commissioned into the Army Reserve. These 29 personnel, men and women, received their commissions following their successful graduation from a Potential Officers Course.

Additionally, I understand that measures are currently under consideration by the military authorities with a view to streamlining elements of the induction process. The outcome of a pilot initiative in this regard is awaited and will further inform next steps.

The Independent Commission on the Defence Forces, which as the Deputy will be aware, is due to report at the end of the year and, in line with its Terms of Reference, is expected to include proposals on the role and contribution of the RDF. I very much look forward to the Report from the Commission.

The Deputy will also be aware that the Defence (Amendment) Act 2021 has now been signed into law and this will serve to update the Defence Legislation on the use of the RDF on a voluntary basis, on-island and overseas in support of the PDF. The amendments contained in the Defence (Amendment) Act do not prejudge any possible recommendations from the Commission, but will facilitate the implementation of any recommendations the Commission may make, which would, of necessity, require legislative amendments.

Finally, I wish to assure the Deputy that the Government appreciates the service of the RDF and recognises its important contribution to Ireland's defence capability.

Defence Forces

115. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence his proposals to negate the impact of reports regarding the spiralling cost of living on serving members of the Permanent Defence Forces. [56517/21]

118. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Defence the improvements that have taken place in the pay and conditions of members of the Defence Forces since this Government was formed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56482/21]

131. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Defence if his attention has been drawn to the financial difficulties being experienced by members of the Naval Service; the practical

measures he plans to take to address the issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56545/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 115, 118 and 131 together.

Public Service pay policy is determined by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform having regard to Public Sector Pay Agreements.

Since the formation of the Government last year, members of the Defence Forces received a 2% increase on annualised salaries from 1st October 2020, in line with the terms of the Public Service Stability Agreement 2018-2020.

The 5% cut in Defence Forces allowances, imposed under the Financial Emergency in the Public Interest (FEMPI) legislation, was also restored from 1st October 2020.

The current public service pay agreement, '*Building Momentum – A New Public Service Agreement 2021 – 2022'* ,provides for further increases in pay and allowances to all public servants, including members of the Defence Forces. Most recently a general round increase in annualised basic salary of 1% or €500, whichever was the greater, came into effect on 1st October 2021.

The agreement provides for further increases in 2022, i.e.:

- The equivalent of a 1% increase in annualised basic salaries to be used as a Sectoral Bargaining Fund, in accordance with Chapter 2 of the Agreement, on 1st February 2022.

- A general round increase in annualised basic salaries for all public servants of 1% or €500, whichever is greater on, 1st October 2022.

In relation to specific measures, the sea going naval personnel tax credit, which was introduced in the Finance Act 2019, was increased from €1,270 to €1,500 for the 2021 tax year and has been extended to the 2022 tax year.

A new sea-going service commitment scheme, for Naval Service personnel, came into effect from 1st January 2021. This scheme is aimed at retaining highly trained and experienced personnel, while also incentivising sea going duties.

The Government remains fully committed to addressing pay and conditions in the Defence Forces. The Programme for Government provided for the establishment of a Commission on the Defence Forces, which was established in December 2020. The terms of reference for the Commission includes an examination of the evolution of all remuneration systems and structures currently in place in the Defence Forces

On completion of the Commission's work, I will consult with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform on the establishment of a permanent pay review body for the Defence Forces.

Defence Forces

116. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence if he will provide information regarding the average 17.5 patrol days that were reported to be cancelled each month in 2019, which rose to 30 per month to date in 2021; the purpose of the patrols; and the reason for cancellation. [56520/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Naval Service is the State's principal sea-going agency and is tasked with a variety of defence and other roles. The primary day-to-day tasking of the Naval Service is to provide a fishery protection service in accordance with the State's obligations as a member of the European Union. The Naval Service is tasked with patrolling all Irish waters from the shoreline to the outer limits of the Exclusive Economic Zone. These patrols are carried out on a regular and frequent basis and are directed to all areas of Irish waters as necessary.

Scheduled patrol days can be impacted by a range of factors including adverse weather conditions, unscheduled maintenance as well as staffing issues.

The table below outlines the number of cancelled Naval Service patrol days for the full year of 2019 and also up to 31 October 2021.

Number of Naval Service cancelled Patrol days

Period covered	Number of cancelled patrol days	Average patrol days cancelled per month
01 Jan 2019 - 31 Dec 2019	94	7.8
01 Jan 2020 – 31 Dec 2020	81	6.7
01 Jan 2021 - 31 October 2021	223	22.3

The increase in cancelled patrol days in 2021 is mainly due to issues relating to COVID 19 as one of the ships, LÉ Ciara could not go to sea given its inability, due to its size, to implement safely the necessary Covid 19 precautions. There were also some unforeseen mechanical issues. In particular 47 scheduled patrol days were cancelled in 2021 due to a fire which occurred on board LÉ NIAMH in late 2020. A shortage of suitably qualified and experienced personnel during the period in question was also a factor.

Notwithstanding the mechanical and staffing challenges being experienced, I am satisfied that the Naval Service continues to carry out the roles assigned by Government.

Question No. 117 answered with Question No. 94.

Question No. 118 answered with question No. 115.

Civil Defence

119. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the nature of the support provided and the corresponding hourly equivalent including the number of trips and kilometres provided by the Civil Defence in support of the HSE operations relating to Covid-19. [56518/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Civil Defence is a volunteer based organisation that supports the Principal Response Agencies (i.e. An Garda Síochána , the HSE and local authorities), government departments and state agencies during national, regional and local emergency and non-emergency events.

From 17 March 2020 to 31 October 2021 Civil Defence volunteers completed 9,184 COVID-19 related taskings while providing sustained support to communities throughout the country.

During this 594 day period:

- A daily average of 32 Civil Defence volunteers provided a daily average of 139 volunteer hours.

- A total of 82,142 volunteer hours were provided by over 900 different Civil Defence volunteers.

- A total of 9,184 individual taskings were undertaken in support to the Principal Response Agencies including the HSE. Support was also provided to the Irish Blood Transfusion Service and the Department of Justice & Equality.

Examples of the types of tasks undertaken by Civil Defence volunteers included;

- providing administrative and first aid assistance at HSE Vaccination Centres

- providing administrative assistance to the Irish Blood Transfusion Service

- transporting persons to and from hospital appointments

- transporting persons to and from nursing homes

- transporting persons to and from testing centres

- sorting and delivering COVID-19 test kits to test centres

- transporting elderly persons to Health Centres and Mass Vaccination Centres

- collecting foodstuffs from suppliers and bakers for food hubs

- delivering food parcels to vulnerable households

- providing assistance to vulnerable persons within communities

- delivering essential PPE to community hospitals and nursing homes

- transporting COVID-19 positive persons from accommodation centres to other locations to allow for self-isolation

- setting up isolation centres and transporting food and laundry for homeless services

The Department of Defence does not hold a record specific to the number of trips and kilometres travelled by Civil Defence in support of the HSE operations relating to Covid-19.

I want to take this opportunity to commend the wonderful work undertaken by Civil Defence volunteers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, their work has been invaluable in supporting communities during this period.

National Development Plan

120. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Defence the key defence measures under the new National Development Plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56501/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): My priority as Minister for Defence is to ensure that the operational capability of the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service, is maintained and developed so as to enable the Defence Forces to carry out their roles as assigned by Government, including overseas deployments.

In accordance with the National Development Plan, the Department of Defence has received a capital envelope of €566 million over the 2022-2025 timeframe, with the 2022 allocation increasing from €131 in 2021 to €141 million. This level of capital funding will boost ongoing efforts at modernising and upgrading defence equipment platforms and built infrastructure.

Among the priority defence equipment and platform projects underway the National Development Plan highlighted the following:

- Upgrade of armoured vehicles

- Replacement of 4 X 4 fleet

- Replacement of troop transport fleet

- Software defined radio project

- Integrated modular body armour system

- Mid-life refit of LÉ Niamh

- Acquisition of a Multi Role Vessel

- C295 Maritime Patrol Aircraft project

A significant number of infrastructural projects will also be advanced and completed under the Defence Forces Built Infrastructure Programme, in line with climate change considerations over the coming years, including:

- Upgrade of training facilities in Kilkenny and Limerick.

- Provision of a new Cadet School in DFTC, Curragh, Co. Kildare.

- Provision of a New Military Medical Facility for the Defence Forces at Casement Aerodrome, Baldonnel, Co. Dublin.

- Upgrade to accommodation facilities in various military locations throughout the country such as Collins Barracks, Cork, McKee Barracks, Dublin and the Naval Base, Haulbowline.

The capital funding provided under the National Development Plan emphasises the importance attached by the Government to ensuring that the Defence Forces have the capabilities necessary to deliver on all the roles assigned by Government. I particularly welcome the funding certainty now provided by the National Development Plan as it will enable the Defence Forces to continue delivering required outputs both at home and overseas.

The Government established an independent Commission on the Defence Forces in December 2020, with a mandate to report within 12 months. The work of the Commission encompasses the consideration of appropriate capabilities, structures and staffing, and I look forward to their report at year end, which will inform future capability decisions.

Defence Forces

121. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Defence when the vacant position of third-party adjudicator for the Permanent Defence Forces conciliation and arbitration scheme will be filled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56370/21]

125. **Deputy Cathal Berry** asked the Minister for Defence the action he will take regarding

the vacant position of adjudicator to the Defence Forces conciliation and arbitration scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56305/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 121 and 125 together.

The Department of Public Expenditure & Reform is responsible for managing the process for the appointment, by Government, of an Adjudicator for all Conciliation and Arbitration (C&A) schemes operating across the public service, including the C&A Scheme for members of the Permanent Defence Force.

The term of the previous Adjudicator ended on 30 June 2021. I am informed that the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is actively engaged in a process to progress the appointment of an Adjudicator for all of the C&A Schemes concerned.

Officials in my Department are in regular contact with officials in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in seeking to expedite this matter.

The Permanent Defence Force Representative Associations, along with all other relevant stakeholders, will be consulted regarding the appointment of a new adjudicator.

In the interim, the Arbitration Board for the C&A Scheme for members of the Permanent Defence Force is available for third party determination of matters that cannot be resolved at Conciliation Council.

Defence Forces

122. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Defence if he will produce a report for discussion on Defence Forces salaries; and his views on the fact that Defence Forces personnel have to access family income supports. [56301/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Public Service pay policy is determined by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, having regard to Public Sector Pay Agreements. The most recent public service pay agreement '*Building Momentum – A New Public Service Agreement 2021 – 2022'* was voted on and has been accepted by members of the Permanent Defence Force Representative Associations, that is RACO and PDFORRA. This agreement includes the following increases:

- A general round increase in annualised basic salary for all public servants of 1% or €500, whichever is greater, which came into effect on 1st October 2021.

- The equivalent of a 1% increase in annualised basic salaries to be used as a Sectoral Bargaining Fund, in accordance with Chapter 2 of the Agreement, on 1st February 2022.

- A general round increase in annualised basic salaries for all public servants of 1% or €500, whichever is greater on, 1st October 2022.

The Working Family Payment (WFP), which was formerly the Family Income Supplement, is a weekly tax-free payment available to employees with children. The purpose of this payment is to support families on low income. Eligibility for the payment is based on average weekly family income and family size. On the basis of these criteria there may be members of the Defence Forces who qualify to apply for the WFP.

Salaries in the Defence Forces, and the broader public service, are based on job require-

ments, as opposed to a person's family circumstances. While I appreciate that some personnel have difficult financial situations, it would be inequitable and unfair to base salaries of individual public sector employees on family size.

The Government remains fully committed to addressing pay and conditions in the Defence Forces and this is reflected in the Programme for Government. In accordance with commitments given in the Programme for Government, an independent Commission on the Defence Forces was established in December 2020. The work of Commission includes examining the evolution of all remuneration systems and structures currently in place in the Defence Forces. The Commission on the Defence Forces is due to complete its work by the end of this year. On completion of the Commissions work, I will consult with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform on the establishment of a permanent pay review body for the Defence Forces.

Departmental Properties

123. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Defence his future plans for lands owned by his Department at Knockalisheen, Meelick, County Clare. [56317/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Deputy will be aware that my Department has given permission to the Office of Public Works for the use of part of this holding as a Direct Provision centre which has been in operation for a number of years. My Department has not received any notification of the intention to vacate the premises.

The Deputy may wish to note that my Department together with the Defence Forces have commenced a review of the current training lands portfolio as committed to the White Paper. In the light of the above, it is not currently intended to dispose of these lands in the immediate future.

Defence Forces

124. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Defence if he will consider a reform of the process by which medals are awarded and honour the service men and women following on from the independent review into medals awarded to those involved in the Jadotville siege; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56546/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): In general, medals are awarded to members of the Defence Forces on the basis of various criteria such as their length of service, for service overseas and for acts of bravery associated with such service both at home and overseas. Defence Force Regulation (DFR) A9 sets out the qualifying criteria required to be awarded such Defence Forces Medals.

This Regulation also delineates the procedures for the awarding of those medals to members of the Defence Forces and requires that any recommendations for possible awards must be made in accordance with the relevant procedures. Such awards are made on the recommendation of a Military Board appointed by the Chief of Staff for the purpose of examining and reporting on every recommendation for an award.

The issue of awarding of military medals to personnel who served at Jadotville has been considered on a number of occasions and most recently by the Independent Review Group (IRG), established to examine the issue of the award of military medals to personnel who served at Jadotville. The IRG's report was published in full on 15 July 2021.

I have publicly welcomed the report in response to its publication last July. The report provides a comprehensive, multidimensional and contextualised account of the Battle of Jadotville and its aftermath. The conclusions and recommendations are based on a rigorous and objective examination of all material and evidence available.

A critical factor is to ensure that the process of awarding medals is underpinned by oversight, objectivity, accountability, and transparency. With a view therefore to maintaining the credibility and integrity of the medals awarding system, the recommendations of the Independent Review Group are being considered in that context.

As the Deputy will be aware, a judicial review is under way at present regarding a recommendation of the IRG report relating to the convening of a Military Board to consider the award of medals. Given that the matter is now before the Courts, it would be inappropriate for me to comment further at this time.

Question No. 125 answered with question No. 121.

Question No. 126 answered with question No. 82.

Question No. 127 answered with question No. 81.

Defence Forces

128. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which he and his Department continue to liaise with the Defence Forces with a view to the resolution of matters outstanding including the strength of all branches, matters relating to pay and conditions or other issues of concern; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56457/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): There is sustained close collaboration between the civil and military sides of the Defence Organisation to identify, resolve and progress any matters that may arise. Such collaboration takes place at all levels of the organisation.

The central forum for the management and oversight of civil and military matters is provided by the joint civil-military Strategic Management Committee, which meets on a monthly basis and provides a means by which senior civil and military managers engage in policy development.

Such integrated civil and military groups are common place within the Organisation, examples of which include are as follows:

- The White Paper on Defence established the policy framework out to 2025 and this was developed jointly by civil-military working groups and overseen by a joint Steering Group. A joint civil-military White Paper Implementation Facilitation Team oversee the implementation of the White Paper and all projects are being, or were undertaken by civil-military teams.

- The Strategic Human Resource Group (SHRG), comprised of senior management, coordinates the HR plans and activities of the civil and military elements of the Defence Organisation to ensure delivery. The initial priority of the SHRG was the oversight of the 15 projects undertaken to facilitate the implementation of the Public Service Pay Commission's recommendations on recruitment and retention. The projects were undertaken by civil-military teams and were facilitated by a joint Programme Management Office.

- The High Level Planning and Procurement Group (HLPPG), comprised of senior civil-military management, is the sanctioning authority where significant levels of expenditure is

proposed on the procurement of goods and services. The HLPPG meets as required to progress equipment procurement and infrastructural development priorities.

Public Service pay policy is outside the remit of my Department, as it is determined by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform having regard to Public Sector Pay Agreements. Within the Defence Organisation, matters that come within the scope of the Conciliation and Arbitration (C&A) Scheme, such as allowances, are considered by the civil and military Conciliation and Arbitration Branches in the first instance.

I meet regularly with senior civil and military management, both jointly and separately, to be appraised of all pertinent matters relating to my Department. As the instances of interactions outlined above illustrate, the bilateral engagement and co-operation by Defence Organisation personnel is comprehensive. However the above are just examples of the wide range of on-going engagement that is undertaken on a daily basis to successfully address any matters that may arise.

United Nations

129. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Defence the status of Irish troops serving in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56576/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The UNIFIL mission in Lebanon continues to represent Ireland's largest overseas deployment and on 4 May 2021 the Government approved the continued participation of the Defence Forces in UNIFIL for a further 12 month period. The Irish contingent serves as part of a joint Ireland/Poland Battalion, with smaller numbers of additional personnel provided by both Hungary and Malta.

Ireland acts as lead Nation providing the battalion commanding officer and the larger troop and logistics contribution to the joint Battalion. The full cohort of personnel provided for as part Ireland's commitment to the joint Battalion, comprises three hundred and forty three personnel.

The Irish Battalion is based in Sector West of UNIFIL's area of operations, with its primary base at Bint Jbeil in the vicinity of At Tiri in southern Lebanon. Two forward observation posts manned by the contingent are located on the 'Blue Line', which separates Lebanon and Israel. The Battalion conducts operational tasks on a daily basis, which include the provision of security, vehicle and foot patrols, checkpoints, establishing and occupying temporary observation posts and liaison/engagement with local leaders. In addition, joint operations are conducted with units of the Lebanese Armed Forces deployed in the UNIFIL area of operations.

Defence Forces

130. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Defence the steps he is taking to improve reporting mechanisms for Defence Forces personnel experiencing sexual abuse, harassment and bullying. [56513/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): All members of the Defence Forces, both male and female, have the right to be treated with respect, equality and dignity and to carry out their duties free from any form of harassment, sexual harassment or bullying. Where there are allegations of offences having been committed, investigations will be initiated by the appropriate authorities.

Arising from the 2002 publication of the External Advisory Committee on the Defence Forces and the three subsequent reports from the Independent Monitoring Group (IMG), a number of reforms were implemented in the intervening years for addressing allegations of inappropriate behaviour, including harassment, sexual harassment and bullying, which are contained in policy documents and in regulation.

The Defence Forces Diversity and Inclusion Strategy Statement and Action Plan aims to ensure that a transparent culture exists, that encourages personnel to report inappropriate behaviour, discrimination, bullying, harassment and sexual harassment.

Defence Force Regulation A7, additionally provides the regulatory framework for dealing with any allegations of inappropriate behaviour in the workplace for serving members, in both a formal and informal way through a trained Designated Contact Person (DCP) network.

Within this framework, Administrative Instruction A7, Chapter 1 sets out the Defence Forces policy and procedures regarding interpersonal relationships in the Defence Forces including bullying and harassment, in order to deter unacceptable behaviour and promote a service environment based on mutual respect, equality and professionalism.

Chapter 2 of Administrative Instruction A7 provides another formal mechanism for members, under Section 114 (1) and 114 (2) of the Defence Act, 1954, to seek redress of wrongs or to make a complaint. Complaints may be submitted orally or in writing to the complainants Commanding Officer, or in the case where they feel themselves wronged by their Commanding Officer, may complain to the Chief of Staff. Notifications are sent to my office and the office of Ombudsman for the Defence Forces formally when any Chapter 2 complaint is submitted and of its subsequent outcome.

Under this mechanism there exists further recourse for the complaint to be referred to the Ombudsman for the Defence Forces for review and recommendation if appropriate. As the Deputy will be aware, the Ombudsman is entirely independent in carrying out his functions in line with the provisions of the Ombudsman for the Defence Forces Act, 2004, and his final report, which may include a recommendation on each complaint, is submitted to me for determination.

I am further advised that in the event that a complaint of a potentially criminal nature is reported, the standard procedure is that the matter is investigated immediately by the Military Police. Where allegations of criminal incidents among serving members are brought to the attention of the Military Police, they are traditionally passed to An Garda Síochána for their consideration and investigation, who have the lawful authority, skills and resources to investigate such matters.

As the Deputy will be aware, I met recently with participants from the Women of Honour Group and with a number 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.

While I have noted that there has been progress in recent years in terms of policies, systems and procedures, it is clear that the culture that is pervading, and the application of those policies, systems and procedures for dealing with bullying, harassment, discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual assault, have not, and are not serving, all Defence Forces personnel well.

On foot of those meetings, I have decided to proceed with the Independent Review, to examine the effectiveness of systems, policies and procedures to deal with workplace issues relat-

ing to bullying, discrimination, harassment, sexual harassment and sexual misconduct in the Defence Forces. The draft Terms for the Independent Review have been shared with a range of stakeholders including the Representative Associations, serving members and the Women of Honour Group. I look forward to receiving their observations which will inform the Terms of the Review which I intend to finalise within the coming weeks. I wish to underline also that this Review will be undertaken by external and entirely independent and unbiased experts in this field. In this regard, potential members are also under consideration.

Separately, I announced last month, interim support measures for members of the Defence Forces impacted by unacceptable behaviour in the workplace.

The appointment of a Confidential Contact Person (CCP) within Raisecaconcern, which has been in place since the announcement, is available to assist both serving and former members of the Defence Forces and will provide a safe place to support the reporting of alleged wrongdoing in the workplace. The confidential contact person is independent and outside of the chain of command and their role is listen to the caller, assist them in documenting their allegations, and provide guidance on follow-on options.

The INSPIRE confidential helpline, which is available on a 24/7 basis for all serving members of the Defence Forces, has also been made available to anyone who has contacted the Confidential Contact Person.

In addition, the Personnel Support Service (PSS) in the Defence Forces assists members and their immediate family with the provision of information and advice on areas including stress management, counselling and referral options.

As I have stated in the past however, those who may have suffered serious wrong or a criminal nature, whether recent or historic, are urged to report their concerns to An Garda Síochána who have lawful authority, skills and resources to investigate such matters.

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.

Question No. 131 answered with question No. 115.

Northern Ireland

132. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Defence the provisions in view of recent violence and rioting in Northern Ireland that are being made by the Defence Forces to deal with potential paramilitary activity from loyalist paramilitaries. [56579/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Primary responsibility for the internal security of the State rests with the Minister for Justice and An Garda Síochána. Accordingly, responsibility for the security aspect of border control rests with An Garda Síochána, while the Revenue Commissioners also have responsibilities relating to their particular mandate.

Among the roles assigned to the Defence Forces in the White Paper on Defence is the provision of Aid to the Civil Power (ATCP) which, in practice, means to provide assistance and support to An Garda Síochána when requested to do so. The Defence Forces also provide support to the Revenue Commissioners, again, when requested to do so.

There is ongoing close liaison between An Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces regarding security matters and regular coordination and liaison meetings take place. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on the detail of these security related meetings.

Military intelligence plays a key role in maintaining an awareness of threats to the State and to forces deployed at home and overseas. The Directorate of Intelligence is a constituent part of Defence Forces Headquarters and delivers threat assessments to the Minister for Defence, the Department of Defence as well as, through the Chief of Staff, to the National Security Committee. Liaison is also maintained between the Directorate and An Garda Síochána.

Naval Service

133. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Defence the actual measures or protocols in place to protect undersea fibre optic cables that run under Irish waters from interference or tampering by foreign or hostile agents; if a risk assessment of the likelihood of such an incident has been carried out by his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56548/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Naval Service is the State's principal seagoing agency maintaining a constant presence 24 hours a day, 365 days a year throughout Ireland's enormous and rich maritime jurisdiction, upholding Ireland's sovereign rights.

It is the maritime component of the Defence Forces and is tasked with a variety of roles in support of a broad range of departments and agencies with responsibilities in the maritime domain. For example, An Garda Síochána, Revenue, Sea Fisheries Protection Authority and various other Government Departments in line with Memoranda of Understanding and Service Level Agreements.

As part of the development of the 2015 White Paper on Defence, the Department engaged in a broad-ranging consultation process, including with all other Departments. At that time the Department of the Communications, Energy and Natural Resources outlined that resilience is built into the system to mitigate against any damage to submarine cables. High capacity and multiple routes provide resilience in the event of route failure. Business Continuity Planning is of interest to all major international corporations. Where damage has occurred to a cable in the past, the operators have shared a cable while repairs are made. Under the National Cyber Security Strategy, an updated detailed risk assessment of the vulnerability of all Critical National Infrastructure and services to cyberattack is being performed.

The Defence Forces are aware of active subsea fibre optic cables landing on the island of Ireland. While these may present strategic locations for marine counter terrorism, the locations and security of these telecommunication resources does not rest with the Defence Forces. As any threat to these installations would be considered an on-island domestic security matter, the responsibility rests with An Garda Síochána. *Question No. 134 answered with question No. 96.*

Flexible Work Practices

135. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment when he will be legislating for blended and flexible working arrangements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56626/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):

The right to request remote work is part of the Government vision to make remote working a permanent feature of Ireland's workforce in a way that can benefit all – economically, socially and environmentally. The commitment to introduce legislation to underpin employees' right to request remote work was made in the national Remote Work Strategy published last January.

I carried out a public consultation in April and there was significant engagement. Informed by the public consultation, which included submissions from both employer and trade union representative groups and also a review of international best practice, the drafting of the General Scheme of the Bill is at an advanced stage. I will be seeking Cabinet approval for the drafting of Heads of a Bill in December and the Bill will be progressed through the Oireachtas as quickly as possible thereafter. The intention is to introduce a mechanism for employees to request remote working that is fair but does not place an undue burden on employers.

In addition, Directive 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council on work-life balance for parents and carers contains provisions in relation to flexible working arrangements. As the right to request flexible working arrangements under the Directive extends only to parents and those with caring responsibilities, the required amendments will relate to the Parental Leave Act 1998 and the Carer's Leave Act 2001 which are not under my policy remit. Responsibility for transposition of the Directive rests with the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman TD.

Departmental Appointments

136. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the status of an application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56681/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): The Employment Permits Section of my Department inform me that a standard application for a General Employment Permit for the person concerned (details supplied) was received on 14 October 2021.

Applications for employment permits are dealt with in date order. Employment Permits Section are currently processing standard applications received on 22nd July 2021.

Applicants can keep track of Employment Permit applications current processing dates at enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Workplace-and-Skills/Employment-Permits/Current-Application-Processing-Dates/Current-Processing-Dates-for-Employment-Permits.html.

Work Permits

137. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if a sport and cultural employment work permit will be expedited in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56693/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): The Employment Permits Section of my Department inform me that a standard application for a Sport and Cultural Employment Permit for the person concerned (details supplied) was received on the 2 November 2021.

Applications for employment permits are dealt with in date order. Employment Permits Section are currently processing standard applications received on 22 July 2021.

Applicants can keep track of Employment Permit applications current processing dates at enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Workplace-and-Skills/Employment-Permits/Current-Application-Processing-Dates/Current-Processing-Dates-for-Employment-Permits.html.

If a permit is urgently required, an applicant may request to have an individual application expedited. A request to have an application expedited will only be considered in exceptional cases. Such a request, which must be accompanied by a compelling business case, should be sent to dermot.kavanagh@enterprise.gov.ie.

Vacant Properties

138. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of IDA properties in Tipperary town; the number of IDA properties that have been sold in the town in the past five years; and the number of vacant IDA properties in Tipperary town. [56706/21]

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

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

Company Registration

139. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the discussions he or his Department have had with the Companies Registration Office in relation to extending the deadline for the submission of company returns from 25 November 2021 in view of the recent upsurge in Covid-19 cases and the disruption this is causing to accountancy businesses; the result of these discussions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56726/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Robert Troy): My Department is in ongoing communication with the Registrar. It is important to acknowledge that the Registrar of Companies is a statutory role and the Registrar has administrative independence in the exercise of her statutory functions. The Registrar has shown considerable flexibility throughout the COVID-19 period in relation to the arrangements for filing annual returns in recognition of the additional challenges facing companies as well as their professional advisers in meeting filing obligations. These include extending the filing deadlines in respect of annual returns due during 2020 and also earlier this year at the end of February and May, and suspending prosecutions and involuntary strike-offs for failure to file annual returns. There is limited discretion however as the Registrar cannot apply flexibility on a case-by-case basis so, when an extension to a deadline is put in place, it applies broadly.

Notably, the exceptional arrangements that were put in place by the Registrar previously were in light of the circumstances prevailing at points in time where many companies were

obliged to pause activity. It is the case that the level of business activity has substantially increased since then. The necessity of having a transparent and up-to-date companies register continues notwithstanding the challenges being experienced by a small number of accountancy firms. There are over 250,000 companies on the register of which approximately 25% have an annual return filing deadline of the 25th of November. The filing of annual returns by this cohort is continuing and is currently in the region of 1,500 per day. Indeed, the CRO has implemented a queueing system on the CRO IT system to manage the heavy volumes of filing between now and the deadline.

I am informed the Registrar is mindful of the particular problems being raised by some small accountancy firms as well as the limitations on the Registrar in taking a case by case approach; the broad desire among the profession to not unduly delay the filing; and the need for the CRO to introduce much sought after improvements to its customer facing IT systems which an extension could delay. Therefore, the Registrar continues to keep the situation under review and is engaging with accountancy representatives to assess the situation.

Work Permits

140. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his Department is making exceptions for permit holders applying for a stamp 4 support letter who were paid less than that specified on their critical skills employment permit due to the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56759/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): The State's employment permit system is designed to supplement Ireland's skills and labour supply over the short to medium term by allowing enterprises to recruit nationals from outside the EEA, where such skills or expertise cannot be sourced from within the EEA at that time. The system is, by design, vacancy led and managed through the operation of the critical skills and ineligible occupation lists. These lists are subject to twice yearly evidence-based review, taking account of labour market research, a public consultation and contextual issues such as Brexit and Covid 19.

The Critical Skills Employment Permit is the primary permit used by the State to attract highly skilled professionals in roles that are critical to the economy. One of the benefits for Critical Skills Employment Permit holders is they can apply for a Support Letter from this Department to present to the Department of Justice in their application for a Stamp 4 immigration permission. If an individual is successful in securing a Stamp 4 they no longer require an employment permit to be employed in the State. Non EEA nationals are eligible to apply for their Support Letters from this Department only when they have completed a minimum of 21 months continuous employment in the State on foot of their Critical Skills Employment Permit. Applications can be submitted up to 12 weeks before the expiry date of their permit.

In light of the uncertainties caused by the Coronavirus pandemic, if an employee was in receipt of either the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment or the Temporary Covid-10 Wage Subsidy Scheme, this will be taken into account when assessing a Stamp 4 Support Letter application. Supporting documentation detailing this reduced payment must be provided with all applications.

Wastewater Treatment

141. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and

Communications when the necessary funding will be put in place to carry out the necessary works to comply with regulations in view of the EPA report that raised concerns regarding Kilgarvan and 11 other towns and villages in County Kerry in which wastewater treatment must improve to help protect freshwater pearl mussels. [56597/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I have no function in relation to this issue. Policy responsibility for this issues rests with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage with operational responsibility resting with Irish Water.

Environmental Schemes

142. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of applicants that have successfully drawn down funding in relation to the support scheme for renewable heat; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56606/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Support Scheme for Renewable Heat (SSRH) is a government funded initiative designed to increase the energy generated from renewable sources in the heat sector whilst also reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The scheme is open to commercial, industrial, agricultural, district heating, public sector and other non-domestic heat users and is administered by Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland. The SSRH provides an operational support for biomass boilers and anaerobic digestion heating systems and an installation grant for renewable heating systems using heat pumps.

There have been 105 applications up to the end of October 2021 of which 62 have received a letter of offer. A total of eight of these have received payment.

Local Authorities

143. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of legislation to allow for the use of anti-dumping CCTV by local authorities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56656/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): My Department published the General Scheme of the Circular Economy Bill 2021 on 15 June 2021. It is my intention under the Bill to facilitate not only the use of CCTV, but also the use of a broad range of Audio Visual Recording (AVR) equipment in order to assist local authorities in their efforts to combat litter and illegal dumping. Drafting of the Bill is well advanced, as is, I understand, the pre-legislative scrutiny process before the Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action. The Bill will be published and enacted as soon as possible after pre-legislative scrutiny has been completed and I have considered the Report of the Committee. I look forward to receiving the Committee's recommendations. A combination of legislation and guidance will help to ensure that the processing of personal data, obtained through the use of CCTV and AVR equipment, may be carried out by local authorities tasked with enforcing both litter and waste legislation, thus providing an important deterrent in order to protect our environment from the scourge of illegal dumping, while at the same time respecting the privacy rights of citizens. The Bill can also facilitate consideration of the use of Fixed Penalty Notices for litter and waste enforcement purposes.

Waste Management

144. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress being made to ensure that there are standardised bin colours used across Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56657/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): The Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy, published in September 2020, contains some 200 measures which will be delivered on a phased basis over the 5 year lifetime of the Plan, including a number of specific measures to address the need to improve our waste segregation and recycling practices, such as standardising the colour coding of bins across the State on a phased basis.Since publication of the Waste Action Plan, however, it has emerged that the standardisation of bin colours is an area that is being assessed at a European level as part of range of measures to improve communication and engagement with EU households on waste management and recycling. An early move to standardise bin colours here in advance of any Europe-wide decision would risk confusion and unnecessary costs, if for example, we were to select colours that turn out to be different from those in any future European mandate. Accordingly, I consider it prudent at this stage to await the outcome of the European Commission's deliberations in this area before proceeding with a national initiative.

Broadband Infrastructure

145. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when a premises (details supplied) will be connected by National Broadband Ireland; the reason the date for the completion has moved from 2021 to 2025; the reason for this delay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56700/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the over 554,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with some 699 schools. I am advised by NBI that, as of 5 November, almost 274,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed or have surveys underway and over 125,000 premises have build underway. NBI has also advised that the first premises are connected in Cavan, Cork, Galway, Limerick and Monaghan and over 30,000 premises are available to order and pre-order across 12 counties.

In addition to the challenges to the delivery of the NBP due to the Covid-19 pandemic, NBI has faced a range of other challenges due to the sheer scale and complexity of rolling out fibre to the home in a rural environment. These include significant tree trimming to ensure cable can be placed on overhead poles, remediation of ducting that has been in place for many decades, the co-ordination of hundreds of contracting crews and addressing the many issues arising week on week which could not have been foreseen until the build crews commenced work on the ground. The Department has worked closely with NBI to put in place a remedial plan under the Contract. This plan addresses delays experienced by NBI, primarily arising as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and re-baselines milestones for 2021. Work is underway to re-baseline milestones for 2022 and beyond. This has resulted in some changes to timeframes for connection for end-users.

Given the scale and complexity of delivery of the new high speed broadband network under

the NBP, I am advised that any dates provided by NBI on its website are based on the best available information at the time and may be subject to change. NBI has recently published details of its full deployment schedule on its website, www.nbi.ie , which enables all premises within the intervention area to have an anticipated service activation date range.

The network rollout for the National Broadband Plan is divided into 227 Deployment Areas (DAs) across the country. These are typically an area of approximately 25km in radius and in total they cover 96% of Ireland's landmass. Counties are generally made up of a number of DAs which means there are differing timescales for connection across county areas. My officials raised the specific issue referred to in the Question with NBI who confirmed that the associated date for anticipated service activation was published for the first time in September 2021 and no other date(s) had previously been published for this premises. There are nearby Deployment Areas in Ballinasloe and Galway City with different activation dates but this premises does not fall within these Deployment Areas.

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

Broadband Infrastructure

146. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the amount applied for and drawn down to date under the encroachment element of the contingency subsidy that is capped at €100 million in the context of the National Broadband Plan; and if he has received a request to decrease or increase that capped threshold. [56719/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): National Broadband Ireland (NBI) has not applied for or drawn down any contingency subsidy in respect of encroachment by another operator in the Intervention Area. The Department has engaged extensively with industry since 2013 through multiple public consultations to determine as accurately as possible where commercial operators have existing high speed broadband networks and where they have plans over the next 7 years to deploy high speed broadband networks. The Department's High Speed Broadband Map (available at broadband.gov.ie) shows the extent of the State Intervention area and also the areas targeted by commercial services as notified by industry to the Department through these consultations.

The NBP contract provides a mechanism for National Broadband Ireland (NBI) to apply for compensation for encroachment in the event that other commercial operators have deployed a future proofed high speed broadband service, of a fibre or equivalent high speed broadband technology, in advance of NBI's own deployment in the intervention area. This contingent subsidy can only be applied for in specific circumstances and is subject to robust governance mechanisms. The encroachment element of the contingency subsidy is capped at €100m and can only be applied for where the Department determines a commercial deployment of high speed broadband meets the requirements set out in the NBP contract, specifically a deployment of a fibre or equivalent high speed broadband technology, and that this deployment has had a negative impact on NBI's business case. The consultation on the NBP map that was carried out in the second half of 2019 in advance of contract award, which established industry's up to date infrastructure and future plans, has reduced the likelihood of the encroachment element of the

contingency subsidy being sought.

Broadband Infrastructure

147. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when broadband will be rolled out to a school (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56729/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. My Department has now prioritised primary schools with no high speed broadband and continues to work with the Department of Education in this regard. An acceleration of this aspect of the National Broadband Plan will see some 679 primary schools connected to high speed broadband by the end of 2022, well ahead of the original target delivery timeframe of 2026. National Broadband Ireland (NBI) estimate that 200 schools will be installed by the end of this year with all 679 schools connected by end 2022. Two schools have already been installed under this initiative in County Roscommon. While the anticipated date for installation at the school referred to in the Question had been Q4 2021, NBI has now informed my Department that due to complexities in the technical design which are being worked on presently, the revised installation date is Q1 2022.

Electric Vehicles

148. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the management companies of some apartment buildings are refusing to permit the installation of electric vehicle charging points despite the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland awarding residents grants for same; the steps he is taking to address this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56664/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Government's policy regarding the increased usage of Electric Vehicles (EVs) is primarily driven by the Climate Action Plan which sets a target of 936,000 EVs by 2030.

Home charging is considered the primary method of charging for the majority of EVs in Ireland and is a convenient, cost effective and environmentally friendly means of charging, especially when using night rate electricity. It accounts for circa 80% of EV charging sessions and will continue to be the primary method of charging in the future.

The Government earlier this year introduced a requirement that new buildings and those undergoing substantial renovation works will have to include charging points for electric vehicles if they have more than 10 car parking spaces.

The EV Home Charger Grant Scheme has been in operation since January 2018 to support the installation of home chargers for purchasers of new and second-hand BEVs and PHEVs. The grant provides generous support towards the full cost of installation of a home charger up to a maximum of €600. As regards existing apartment buildings, work is currently being progressed to expand the EV home charger grant to include shared parking in apartment blocks and similar developments. My Department is working closely with the SEAI and expects a scheme for apartments to open in the near future.

Disability Services

149. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Transport if a disabled parking space that is not located on a public road such as in a private car park for a shopping centre or other building, is legally unenforceable if a non-disabled driver uses it; if so, his plans to address same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56611/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): Disabled parking regulations, as with every other aspect of road traffic law, can only be enforced on public roads and car parks.

The installation and enforcement of disabled bays in private car parks such as those attached to shopping centres and other commercial premises is the responsibility of the car park's owner. Neither An Garda Síochána nor local authority traffic wardens have the legal powers to issue Fixed Charge Notices (FCNs) on private property.

Public Transport

150. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport the policy in relation to dogs travelling on LocalLink bus services, regional bus services, trains and other forms of public transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56638/21]

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

It is the National Transport Authority (NTA) which has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally. The NTA also has national responsibility for integrated local and rural transport, including management of the Rural Transport Programme which operates under the TFI Local Link brand. The NTA works with the relevant public transport operators, who have responsibility for day to day operational issues.

In light of the NTA's responsibilities in this matter, I have referred your question to the NTA for direct reply to you. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Road Projects

151. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport the progress being made with the Athy distributor road; the target date for opening the road; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56639/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of each local authority in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. State grants, where applicable, are intended to supplement the funding allocated to the maintenance and improvement of roads by local authorities from their own resources.

While there has been a significant increase in Exchequer funding for regional and local roads particularly in the last four years, funding is not yet at the level needed for the adequate protection and renewal of regional and local roads. For this reason the primary focus for capital investment under the National Development Plan (NDP) continues to be the protection

and renewal of the network with some limited investment in road improvement schemes. The construction of a Distributor Road to the south of Athy connecting to the N78 is one of those schemes.

Following the conclusion of the tender process for the main construction contract for the scheme, the contract was awarded recently and the construction programme will now get underway. Kildare County Council is responsible for the implementation of the scheme and my understanding is that the estimated project completion date is 2024.

Driver Test

152. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will ensure that driving instructors whose car is being used by a pupil to undertake their driving test are afforded shelter and access to a toilet at RSA driving test centres; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56640/21]

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

This is an operational matter for the RSA and one in which I have no role. This question is therefore being referred to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

Transport Infrastructure Ireland

153. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport if the young adult travel card will be extended to include privately operated bus routes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56645/21]

156. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Transport if he will revisit the young adult travel card scheme in order that it includes commercial coach operators with the attendant good effects of opening up more routes and choice and increasing the opportunity for young persons to travel reliably on public over personal transport and tackle emissions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56680/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 153 and 156 together.

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

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

As part of Budget 2022, I secured €25m of funding to provide for the introduction of a youth travel card (YTC). The YTC will allow any person nationwide who is between 19 and 23 years old to avail of an entitlement for discounted travel costs and to increase the level of discount over and above the current student discount to an average discount of 50% across all services, including city, intercity and rural services.

The NTA have commenced work in relation to the implementation of the new fares structures for young adults. I have therefore forwarded the Deputies questions to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Rail Network

154. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will extend the DART+ South West Project to Newbridge, County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56646/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy will be aware, as Minister for Transport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure in the Greater Dublin Area, including planning and implementation of the *DART+ Programme*.

The *DART+ Programme* is a cornerstone programme of projects for the development of rail in the Greater Dublin Area. The Programme comprises of *DART Fleet*, as well as the *DART+ West*, *DART+ South-West*, *DART+ Coastal (South)* and *DART+ Coastal (North)* projects. Collectively these projects will extend and enhance the current DART system and services west to Maynooth and Celbridge/Hazelhatch, south to Greystones and north to Drogheda. The NTA in consultation with Iarnród Éireann is progressing the various projects which are at varying stages of planning and development.

The scope of the DART+ Programme as will be progressed through the statutory planning system is as set out in the *Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area*. However, the Deputy may wish to be aware that the NTA is currently consulting on revisions to the *Transport Strategy* and a public consultation period is open until early December. The draft *Strategy* published for public consultation does include proposals to extend DART services further once the DART+ Programme has been delivered and I would encourage the Deputy to make her views known on any such extensions as part of that public consultation process.

Rail Network

155. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport if the number of trains serving Athy railway station will be improved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56648/21]

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 and I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply.

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

Question No. 156 answered with Question No. 153.

Departmental Schemes

157. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Transport the number of persons who took part in the taxsaver scheme in each year since 2016 in each county in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56683/21]

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

The National Transport Authority (NTA) is responsible for the collection and publication of statistics relating to public transport and I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Rail Network

158. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Transport the reason improvements to rail services have not been referenced in the Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan; and the plans of the NTA regarding rail services in the context of the Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan. [56703/21]

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

It is the National Transport Authority (NTA) which has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally. The NTA also has national responsibility for integrated local and rural transport, including management of the Rural Transport Programme which operates under the TFI Local Link brand.

The Connecting Ireland plan is a major national public transport initiative developed by the NTA with the aim of increasing public transport connectivity, particularly for people living outside the major cities and towns. It will significantly increase both the number of routes and the frequency of existing services right across the country.

The Deputy will be pleased to learn that Connecting Ireland proposes to specifically expand the public transport network in rural areas and to increase service levels. Under Connecting Ireland, the NTA is proposing an overall increase of approximately 25% in rural bus services as part of the five year Connecting Ireland plan. Hundreds of rural villages and areas will for the first time be served by a viable public transport link.

I joined the NTA to launch its Connecting Ireland consultation on 29 October 2021. I would urge everyone to review the NTA's proposals for their area and give their feedback to the NTA to guide the implementation of Connecting Ireland.

I have also referred the Deputy's question regarding rail services in the context of the Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Rail Network

159. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Transport when the strategic rail review will be completed; if the review will take into account a review of the timetables on the Limerick Junction, Waterford and the Limerick to Ballybrophy services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56704/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy is aware, my Department, in co-operation with the Department for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland, is undertaking a *Strategic Rail Review*. This *Review*, which Arup consultants have been appointed to undertake, will inform amongst other matters, the development of inter-urban and inter-regional rail on the Island of Ireland over the coming decades, including the role of enhanced service provision across the network.

Work on the *Review* commenced in September with a view to completion in Q4 2022.

Transport Policy

160. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Transport when the National Investment Framework for Transport will be published; the proposed purpose of the framework; the elements that will be contained in same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56720/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): The National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland (NIFTI) is the Department of Transport's new high-level strategic framework for prioritising future investment in the land transport network. NIFTI is currently being revised following public consultation and it is expected that the final version of the framework will be brought to Government for approval and published before the end of this year.

NIFTI has been developed to ensure that sectoral investment in transport is aligned with the National Planning Framework and supports the delivery of the ten National Strategic Outcomes. Transport investment is essential to realising our spatial and climate change objectives, and it is therefore crucial that we have developed this strategy which is aligned with and supports Government's overarching policy objectives. NIFTI sits alongside other Departmental and Government policy and strategies, such as the Climate Action Plan, National Development Plan and forthcoming Sustainable Mobility Policy.

The framework establishes four investment priorities to ensure that transport investment is aligned with these overarching policy aims, and delivered in a sustainable and proportionate manner. The four priorities are:

To ensure that NIFTI supports the National Planning Framework in the most sustainable and cost-effective manner possible, it establishes modal and intervention hierarchies to supplement the Investment Priorities. The modal hierarchy will ensure that the most environmentally sustainable feasible solution to a given transport need is deployed on a given project. Project sponsors will have to consider walking and cycling before public transport, and public transport before private transport. If a solution from further down the hierarchy is proposed, project sponsors will have to justify why a more environmentally sustainable solution is not suitable for the problem at hand.

Similarly, the intervention hierarchy will require project sponsors to first consider maintenance and then optimisation of existing assets. Only when these more conservative solutions have been demonstrated to be unsuitable will significant improvement of existing infrastructure or outright new infrastructure be considered.

The hierarchies are not rigid tools. Their role is to ensure that for a given transport need or problem the most appropriate solution is deployed, but investment will remain principles-based and objectives-led. Where project sponsors can demonstrate that solutions from higher on either hierarchy are infeasible solutions to meet the objectives of a given investment, it follows that

solutions from further down the hierarchy will be considered.

Transport Policy

161. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Transport the studies that have been carried out by his Department in developing its transport strategy on the percentage of persons that choose to commute by walking, cycling and e-scooters in cases in which there is good walking, cycling and e-scooters infrastructure; the results of such studies by distance, age, disability and weather; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56721/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department is currently finalising a new *Sustainable Mobility Policy Framework*. This will set out a strategic framework for walking, cycling and public transport to support Ireland's overall requirement to achieve a 51% reduction in carbon emissions by the end of this decade. The new framework will replace the existing sectoral policy documents from 2009 - *Smarter Travel, A Sustainable Transport Future 2009-2020* and the *National Cycle Policy Framework.*

A collaborative approach has been taken in developing the new framework. A stakeholder engagement event was held at the end of 2019 alongside the publication of a comprehensive range of background papers for public consultation. Over 250 submissions were received as part of the public consultation process from individuals and organisations. Following a review of those submissions, a report of the public consultation was published on my Department's website and further bilateral stakeholder engagement has taken place.

Transport trends such as those identified in the Central Statistics Office's *National Travel Survey (NTS)* have been considered in the development of the new framework including data relating to user demographics, journeys taken, reasons for travel and chosen transport mode. The 2019 *NTS* also highlighted geographic variations in transport trends which shows that transport needs are not uniform across the country and tailored solutions will be needed for both urban and rural areas.

I hope to publish the *Sustainable Mobility Policy Framework* shortly. It will set out a comprehensive set of actions to increase active travel provision and improve public transport capacity and services across the country in order to make sustainable modes the preferred choice for as many people as possible. It is also important to consider the role that newer forms of mobility such as e-scooters can play in reducing reliance on the private car. The Road Traffic and Roads Bill 2021, which is currently at Second Stage in this House, contains measure to give the Minister the power to make regulations to legalise the use of e-scooters on public roads. The regulations will determine conditions for their use and technical standards.

Tax Data

162. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Finance the total tax take on a litre of petrol retailing at €1.10, a litre of diesel, retailing at €1.10 and on a litre of LPG retailing at €1.10, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56592/21]

163. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Finance the total tax take on a litre of petrol retailing at €1.50, on a litre of diesel retailing at €1.50 and on a litre of LPG retailing at €1.50; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56594/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 162

and 163 together.

I am advised by Revenue that the breakdown of the tax liabilities, at current Mineral Oil Tax (MOT), Carbon Duty and VAT rates, on a litre of petrol, diesel and Auto-LPG retailing at €1.10 or alternatively at €1.50 are as follows.

Petrol

Price (tax inclusive) per Litre €	MOT Component of Price €	Carbon Component of Price €	VAT Component of Price €
1.10	0.54	0.09	0.21
1.50	0.54	0.09	0.28

Diesel

Price (tax inclusive) per Litre €	MOT Component of Price €	Carbon Component of Price €	VAT Component of Price €
1.10	0.43	0.11	0.21
1.50	0.43	0.11	0.28

Auto LPG

Price (tax inclusive) per Litre €	MOT Component of Price €	Carbon Component of Price €	VAT Component of Price €
1.10	0.06	0.05	0.21
1.50	0.06	0.05	0.28

Question No. 163 answered with Question No. 162.

Tax Data

164. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Finance the total tax take by his Department on petrol sales for February 2021 compared to the total tax take for this product for October 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56596/21]

165. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Finance the total tax take on sales of diesel for February 2021; the way this figure compares this to the total tax take for this product for October 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56599/21]

166. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Finance the total tax take on sales of LPG for February 2021; the way this figure compares to the total tax take for this product for October 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56602/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 164, 165 and 166 together.

I am advised by Revenue that the table below shows the provisional breakdown of tax receipts for petrol, diesel and Auto-LPG for the months of February and October 2021. As a significant proportion of VAT collected on diesel sales is refunded to VAT registered businesses,

the table provides for the net (VAT) receipts based on estimated volumes and price. It should be noted that there was a significant increase in volumes consumed during that time frame, likely due to the easing of Covid-19 restrictions.

Period	Tax	Petrol €m	Diesel €m	Auto-LPG €m
Feb-21	Mineral Oil Tax (Non -Carbon Charge)	20.72	83.30	0.01
	Carbon	2.82	16.60	0.00
	VAT	10.52	12.58	0.03
	Total Tax February	34.06	112.48	0.04
Oct-21	Mineral Oil Tax (Non-Carbon Charge)	43.14	130.71	0.01
	Carbon	5.88	26.04	0.00
	VAT	28.72	25.87	0.03
	Total Tax October	77.73	182.62	0.05

It should be noted that there has been no increase in the rate of Mineral Oil Tax (non-carbon charge) between February and October. The increase in the revenue yielded arises as a result of an increase in volumes consumed, likely due to the easing of Covid-19 restrictions during that time frame.

The following table shows the provisional volumes for petrol, diesel and Auto-LPG. As the receipts for February and October are on foot of returns made in respect of the previous month, the volumes shown relate to January and September.

Volume in Kilolitres (Provisional)

Month	Petrol	Diesel	Auto-LPG
Jan-21	38,130	197,307	148
Sep-21	79,876	310,449	177

Question No. 165 answered with Question No. 164.

Question No. 166 answered with Question No. 164.

Inflation Rate

167. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to address rising inflation and the resulting increase in the cost of living; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56629/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): While Covid-19 had a deflationary impact both in Ireland and internationally last year, inflation has picked up since the beginning of this year. The annual rate of HICP inflation rose to 5.1 per cent in October – the highest rate since 2003. The emergence of inflationary pressures is not unique to Ireland however, with inflation rates of 6.2 and 4.1 per cent recorded in the US and euro area respectively in October.

The recent rise in inflation is partly explained by temporary factors, which are expected to fade over time, including 'base effects' associated with the 'normalisation' of oil prices following their collapse last spring and the imbalance between supply and demand that emerged following re-opening. This has been compounded by global supply chain disruptions, including transport bottlenecks, input shortages (e.g. semi-conductors) and labour supply shortages in some sectors. More recently, increases in wholesale energy prices have put additional upward pressure on prices, with energy inflation of 24 per cent recorded in October.

Looking ahead, the most likely scenario is that inflation will moderate over time as temporary factors fade, demand stabilises and supply pressures ease. The Department is forecasting inflation of 2¼ per cent this year and next. Notwithstanding the strong pick-up in the rate of inflation in recent months, the rate for 2021 as a whole is likely to be close to the Department's projection. However, the recent spike in wholesale energy prices means that there could already be some upside to the projection for next year. Indeed, the upside scenario published alongside the Budget, which incorporated these price rises and other factors, would suggest that an inflation rate between 2½ to 3 per cent for 2022 is now increasingly likely.

The Government is very conscious of inflationary pressures and introduced a range of measures in Budget 2022 to protect households against increases in the cost of living, including a personal income tax package worth €520m and a social welfare package of over €550m. The fuel allowance was increased by €5 per week to compensate lower income households for the additional energy costs they are likely to incur due to an increase in the carbon tax. There were also increases in the allocation of Early Learning Care and School-Age Childcare to ensure childcare prices do not rise.

Additionally, the Government is pursuing a broadly neutral budgetary policy in order to contain domestic inflationary pressures. It is crucial that we do not have an inflation 'chain reaction' which would damage our international cost competitiveness.

Tax Exemptions

168. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will remove VAT from the cost of making a will if a charitable bequest is included; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56641/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that the VAT rating of goods and services is subject to EU VAT law, with which Irish VAT law must comply. In accordance with the Directive legal services, including legal services supplied in the course of making a will, are liable to VAT at the standard rate, currently 23%. There is no discretion under the Directive for Ireland to remove VAT on these supplies.

Tax Code

169. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider increasing the category A, B and C thresholds for capital acquisitions tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56691/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy may be aware, Capital Acquisitions Tax (CAT), including gifts and inheritances, is a tax on unearned wealth. It is recognised that effective taxation of capital is an important tool for addressing income and wealth inequality. Therefore, gift and inheritance taxes, including the efficient use of relief

thresholds, are fundamental elements of using our tax code to help create a fairer society.

There have been many increases to the CAT thresholds in recent years. The Group A threshold was raised from €225,000 to €280,000 in Budget 2016, to €310,000 in 2017, to €320,000 in Budget 2019 with a further rise to €335,000 in Budget 2020.

The Group B threshold rose from €30,150 to €32,500 in Budget 2017 and the Group C threshold rose from €15,075 to €16,250 in Budget 2017.

You will appreciate that there would be a significant cost in making further substantial changes to the Group A, Group B and Group C thresholds. For example, recent Revenue estimates indicate that the cost of increasing the CAT A threshold from its current €335,000 to €400,000 would be €35 million, the estimated cost of increasing the CAT B threshold from its current €32,500 to €35,000 would be €6 million, and the estimated cost of increasing the CAT C threshold from its current €16,250 to €19,000 would be €3 million.

The options available for providing increases to CAT thresholds need to be considered in the context of available resources and must be balanced against competing demands.

At the moment, I do not believe that a compelling case can be made for increases to the CAT thresholds. Therefore, I have no plans to increase the category A, B or C Group CAT thresholds.

Tax Exemptions

170. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider extending tax exemptions for community sports clubs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56696/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am informed by Revenue that the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (TCA) provides the following reliefs for sporting bodies, including community sports clubs:

- Section 235 TCA provides for an exemption from Income Tax or Corporation Tax, as appropriate, for bodies established for the sole purpose of the promotion of athletic or amateur games or sports ("approved sporting bodies") for so much of their income that is applied for the purpose of promoting the game or sport in question. This exemption shall be granted where it can be shown to the satisfaction of Revenue that such income is applied solely for those purposes.

- Section 847A TCA provides for a scheme of tax relief for donations to certain sports bodies for the funding of capital projects to be approved by the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and Media. Bodies which apply for approval must submit both a valid tax clearance certificate and sports exemption certificate in support of this application.

A sporting body which has been granted an exemption from Income Tax and Corporation Tax under section 235 TCA, may also be exempt from other duties and taxes:

- Section 172C TCA provides that sporting bodies with an Income Tax or Corporation Tax exemption are exempt from Dividend Withholding Tax.

- Section 610A(1) TCA provides that a capital gain accruing to an approved sporting body will be exempt from Capital Gains Tax to the extent that the disposal proceeds are used for the sole purpose of promoting athletic or amateur games or sports. In the case of disposals on or after 1 January 2005, if the proceeds (or a portion thereof) are donated to a sporting body

and the donation is approved by the Minister for Finance then the gain will be exempt from Capital Gains Tax in proportion to the amount that has been so donated (section 610A(2) TCA). In general, the proceeds of the disposal must be spent within five years of their receipt.

- Transfers (purchases and gifts) and leases of land to approved sporting bodies are also exempt from Stamp Duty under section 82(b) of the Stamp Duties Consolidation Act 1999, provided the land is used solely for sports purposes.

There is no general exemption from VAT for a sporting body. For VAT purposes, member-owned sports clubs are not regarded as operating in the course of business in respect of their core sporting activities. However, they are liable to VAT on bar and restaurant sales if their turnover from those activities is over the registration threshold for the supply of services (currently €37,500 per annum where the body supplies services only).

The deposit income of a sporting body is also not exempt from Deposit Interest Retention Tax.

A full list of bodies granted tax exemption under section 235 TCA is available on the Revenue website.

Whilst the various exemptions and reliefs are kept under review by my department, I have no plans at present to expand them.

Covid-19 Pandemic

171. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance if expenditure on Covid-19 tests for health appointments can be claimed as a health expense under Med 1; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56755/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that Section 469 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 provides for tax relief in respect of qualifying health expenses. Only "health expenses" incurred in the provision of "health care", which has been carried out or advised by a "practitioner", will qualify for tax relief.

Health care is defined as the "prevention, diagnosis, alleviation or treatment of an ailment, injury, infirmity, defect or disability, and includes care received by a woman in respect of a pregnancy".

Health expenses are defined as "expenses in respect of the provision of health care" and includes:

(a) the services of a practitioner,

(b) diagnostic procedures carried out on the advice of a practitioner,

(c) maintenance or treatment necessarily incurred in connection with the services or procedures

referred to in paragraph (a) or (b),

(d) drugs or medicines supplied on the prescription of a practitioner,

(e) the supply, maintenance or repair of any medical, surgical, dental or nursing appliance

used on

the advice of a practitioner,

(f) physiotherapy or similar treatment prescribed by a practitioner,

(g) orthoptic or similar treatment prescribed by a practitioner,

(h) transport by ambulance,

(i) educational psychological assessments carried out by an educational psychologist in certain

circumstances, or

(j) speech and language therapy carried out by a speech and language therapist in certain

circumstances.

A practitioner is defined as a person who is "(a) registered in the register established under section 43 of the Medical Practitioners Act 2007, (b) registered in the register established under section 26 of the Dentists Act, 1985, or, (c) in relation to health care provided outside the State, entitled under the laws of the country in which the care is provided to practice medicine or dentistry there".

Where an individual incurs expenditure in obtaining a COVID-19 test, he or she will be entitled to make a claim for tax relief on that expense if the above criteria are met.

Further details in relation to income tax relief for health expenses are set out on the Revenue website and in Tax and Duty Manual Part 15-01-12, both of which may be found at the links below:

- Revenue website: www.revenue.ie/en/personal-tax-credits-reliefs-and-exemptions/health-and-age/health-expenses/index.aspx

- Tax and Duty Manual Part 15-01-12: www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-15/15-01-12.pdf.

The Deputy may also be interested to know that, in the context of the Finance Bill 2021, I am bringing forward a proposal to exempt from benefit-in-kind, subject to a number of conditions, expenses incurred by an employer in providing certain health and wellbeing related benefits to its employees, including expense incurred in providing a COVID-19 test. If approved by the Oireachtas, the measure will have effect from 1 January 2021.

Tax Yield

172. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance further to Parliamentary Question No. 78 of 10 November 2021, the assumptions on which the estimates are based particularly with regard to household and general carbon consumption in each of the years to 2030; if they are based on projections; and if so, the projections and the details of same in tabular form. [56823/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The most recent projection provided by my Department for the period 2021 to 2030 is €9.2 billion in additional carbon tax revenues. The annual breakdown of these receipts was provided in the PQ reply of 10 November 2021. As

stated in the same PQ reply, projections are point in time exercises, and are revised periodically to take account of factors such as changes in the macroeconomic environment, policy decisions by Government and other factors.

My Department's carbon tax receipts projection for the period 2020-2030 factor in a declining carbon tax base reflecting changing behaviour in response to the tax, amongst other factors. This estimates use a base of 21.5 metric tonnes, or Mt, of CO2, which reflects the estimated carbon tax base in 2019, informed by carbon tax receipts for that year.

The carbon tax base projections for the period 2020 to 2030 reflect the trajectory of official Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) emissions projections. Specifically, this adjustment reflects the EPA's non-ETS 'WAM' projections for percentage growth in annual equivalent Mt of CO2. This particular scenario is used to inform my Department's projections as it identifies non-ETS (EU Emissions Trading System) emissions. These emissions are reflective of emissions subject to the carbon tax, while in general EU ETS emissions are not subject to the carbon tax. It also reflects a 'with additional measures', or WAM scenario, which includes the Government's commitment to a €100 per tonne carbon tax by 2030.

The annual projections for the period 2021 to 2030 are available at the following link: www.epa.ie/publications/monitoring--assessment/climate-change/air-emissions/EPA-Irelands-Greenhouse-Gas-Emissions-Projections-report-2020-2040v2.pdf.

Flexible Work Practices

173. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform when he will be legislating for blended and flexible working arrangements for public service workers in possible circumstances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56627/21]

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

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

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

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

The Tánaiste and Minster for Enterprise, Trade and Employment will be bringing forward

legislation to provide employees with the right to request remote working which will apply to both public and private sectors.

Covid-19 Pandemic

174. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the discussions she has had with Sport Ireland in relation to the reason that adult non-vaccinated players cannot take part in basketball matches given younger unvaccinated players are allowed play in such competitions; if Sport Ireland has provided her with medical evidence supporting its policies; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56723/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): The Return to Sport Expert Group, which is chaired by an official of my Department, was set up last year to provide guidance to the National Governing Bodies of sport and other sporting bodies with a view to facilitating consistency of their return to train/play/spectating protocols with the prevailing public health advice. The Expert Group includes medical personnel from a range of sporting organisations, and it is in this context that Sport Ireland receives expert medical opinion to ensure a safe return to Sport.

At its meeting on 19 October 2021, and following consideration of the public health advice, Government agreed that additional aspects of society could reopen only with the full range of protective measures in place. As such, current restrictions under the Government's plan state that organisers of indoor and outdoor group activities should ensure that appropriate protective measures are in place. For indoor sports, this means:

- The use of the EU Digital COVID Certificate (vaccine or recovery certificate) will be required for accessing indoor sporting activities and events.

- Where individuals have mixed immunity status, pods of up to 6 participants will be permitted (excluding adult coaches/instructors).

- Multiple pods will be permissible subject to protective measures.

- The overall number of pods will have regard to the size of venue and there should be substantial social distance between individual pods.

- For Vaccinated individuals no fixed capacity limits apply to these activities.

- Vaccinated spectators attending indoor sporting events should be fully seated.

The Government's decision on 5th November to widen the range of sporting opportunities for young people, so as to enable under 18 indoor sports games and competitions in sports such as basketball to go ahead, responds to the widely expressed viewpoint from parents in particular about the important physical and mental wellbeing benefits of such sport to young people. The decision also recognises that children under the age of 12 are not currently eligible for vaccination, in contrast to other age cohorts in the population.

Updated guidance has been provided by Sport Ireland to sporting organisations to allow children under 18 years of age to participate in indoor games and competition activities according to the ordinary rules and limits of the sport concerned and subject to the implementation of various mitigation measures. The full guidance can be accessed on the Sport Ireland website at:

www.sportireland.ie/covid19/return-to-sport-and-physical-activity

Covid-19 Pandemic

175. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the reason a business (details supplied) in County Kerry that commenced trading in July 2020 and provided outdoor dining is being excluded from the outdoor seating grant scheme; if this decision will be reviewed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56762/21]

177. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the reason a business (details supplied) in County Kerry that commenced trading in 2021 and provided outdoor dining is being excluded from the outdoor seating grant scheme; if this decision will be reviewed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56821/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 175 and 177 together.

As the Outdoor Dining Enhancement Scheme is an operational matter for Fáilte Ireland, I have referred the matter on to the agency for direct response to the Deputy. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Tourism Policy

176. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if further consideration will be given to the development and promotion of monastic trails either as standalone tourism projects or as part of walking and cycling trails within the State and on a cross-Border basis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56814/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The development and promotion of tourism product experiences are operational matters for Fáilte Ireland. Accordingly, I have asked Fáilte Ireland to provide further information directly to the Deputy. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Question No. 177 answered with Question No. 175.

Commercial Rates

178. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will relieve community sports clubs from paying commercial rates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56695/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): The Commissioner of Valuation is independent in the exercise of his functions under the Valuation Acts 2001-2020. The making of valuations for rating purposes and decisions in relation to exemptions is the sole responsibility of the Commissioner and I, as Minister, have no function in decisions in this regard.

The Valuation Acts 2001 to 2020 provide that all buildings used or developed for any purpose are rateable unless expressly exempted under Schedule 4 of the Acts. However, Paragraphs

4, 4A and 4B of Schedule 4 provide for certain exemptions for property directly occupied for sporting purposes.

Land developed for sport, such as a playing pitch, has a long standing exemption from rateability. Paragraphs 4A and 4B of Schedule 4, added by the Valuation (Amendment) Act 2015 provides for the exemption of property used exclusively for community sport and otherwise than for profit.

As a result of the changes made by the Valuation (Amendment) Act 2015, it is normally property registered under the Registration of Clubs (Ireland) Act 1904 and used for the sale and consumption of alcohol and property used to generate other commercial type income that is rateable. Income from membership fees and income from community organisations and participants in community sport using buildings does not result in a property occupied by a sports club and used for community sport purposes being deemed rateable.

I recognise the positive contribution made by sport's clubs in their community and on the whole, much property occupied by sports clubs is exempt from commercial rates.

The Valuation Acts are very specific about the range of exemptions that can be applied by the Commissioner. Where a property occupier is unsure as to the position of their property being rateable or exempt, they should contact the Valuation Office by e-mail at valuationservices@valoff.ie.

There are a number of avenues of redress for an occupier of rateable property who is dissatisfied with a determination of valuation made under the provisions of the Valuation Acts. Firstly, before a determination is made, there is a right to make representations to the Valuation Office in relation to a proposed valuation. Later in the process, if the occupier is still dissatisfied with the determination, there is a right of appeal to the Valuation Tribunal which is an independent body set up for the purpose of hearing appeals against determinations of the Valuation Office. There is also a right of appeal to the Higher Courts on a point of law.

National Parks

179. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if newly married couples are no longer permitted to take wedding pictures in Killarney National Park (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56595/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): I am pleased to inform the Deputy that there is absolutely no substance to the recent claims that married couples are not permitted to take their photos in Killarney National Park. There has been no change of policy introduced in respect of the treatment of commercial photography in the National Park. Photography by the general public and amateur wildlife photography is permitted within the park. All commercial events, including professional photography, wedding, promotional, fashion etc. is subject to a permit system. This has been the case for quite some time.

A permit has long been required for both insurance and indemnification purposes. It is incumbent upon the professional photographer to apply for a current permit - which is readily and quickly available. It is a very simple process for the professional photographer to complete and permits apply for the year. The staff of my Department will always accommodate photographers and work with them to ensure safety for all at the National Park.

Housing Policy

180. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if consideration will be given to facilitating dialogue between local authorities regarding the possibility of an intercounty housing transfer system for tenants wishing to seek a housing transfer from one local authority to another; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56649/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The oversight and practical management of housing waiting lists, including the allocation and transfer of tenancies, is a matter for the relevant local authority in accordance with the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009, and associated regulations.Section 22 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009, requires all local authorities, as a reserved function, to make an allocation scheme determining the order of priority to be accorded in the allocation of dwellings to households qualified for social housing support and to households approved for a transfer, the allocation of which would, in the opinion of the authority, meet the accommodation needs and requirements of the households. Ultimately, it is a matter for the local authority to decide the conditions to be met in relation to transfer applications.All four Dublin authorities have provisions in their allocation schemes for inter authority/mutual transfers for sitting tenants whereby the authority is prepared to accommodate applications for inter authority/mutual transfers provided certain criteria are met. All four Dublin authorities also make provision in their allocation schemes for households wishing to move to a home more suitable to their household needs. Similar arrangements apply in the two Cork and two Galway local authorities.It is also already possible for households to move and relocate between local authority areas under the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) Scheme where the household income is within the appropriate income limits. Guidelines on inter-authority movement were introduced in 2017 to allow for local authorities to facilitate movement of HAP households from one local authority area to another in cases where a HAP tenant on a transfer list wishes to access rented accommodation with HAP support in another local authority area.HAP tenants continue to be dealt with by their originating local authority. However, the rent limits will be those that apply in the local authority where the property is situated. The originating local authority will engage with the relevant new local authority to facilitate eligible requests for inter-authority movement.

Electoral Process

181. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to simplify the voter registration process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56650/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): The Programme for Government - *Our Shared Future* commits to a broad range of electoral reforms including a commitment to the modernisation of voter registration. The modernisation includes the introduction of rolling registration; the simplification of forms and processes; the gradual roll-out of an online option for registration; a single, national database within which Local Authorities would continue to maintain their own registers; and the use of PPSNs in the registration process. Together, these reforms will simplify and streamline the process of registration, making it easier for people to register to vote and update their details.

The Electoral Reform Bill, which provides for the establishment of an independent Electoral Commission and the regulation of online political advertising also provides the legislative

underpinning for the reform of the electoral registration process. The Bill was the subject of thorough pre-legislative scrutiny by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Committee's report was published in August.

My Department is working with the Office of the Attorney General on the drafting of the Bill and good progress is being made.

Rental Sector

182. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of inspections to examine the standards of rental accommodation undertaken by Kildare County Council in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the number of improvement notices issued in each year as a result; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56658/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2019 specify requirements in relation to a range of matters, such as structural repair, sanitary facilities, heating, ventilation, natural light, fire safety and the safety of gas, oil and electrical installations. With very limited exemptions, these apply to all private rented accommodation. All landlords have a legal obligation to ensure that their rented properties comply with these regulations. Responsibility for the enforcement of the Regulations rests with the relevant local authority.

If an inspection identifies that a property has been found to be non-compliant with the regulations, it is a matter for the Local Authority to determine what action is necessary and appropriate, including the issuing of an Improvement Letter, Improvement Notice, Prohibition Notice or further legal recourse.

To aid increased inspections of properties and ensure greater compliance with the Regulations, increased Exchequer funding has been made available to local authorities each year since 2018 to enable them to build inspection capacity incrementally, with payments based on the number of inspections undertaken. Significant progress was made across the sector. The number of inspections more than doubled from 19,645 in 2017 to 40,728 in 2019. A total of €6 million in Exchequer funding was made available to local authorities in 2020 and this was increased to €10 million this year.

However, given the need for inspectors to enter tenants' homes, pandemic restrictions have greatly impacted on inspection activity since March 2020. The number of inspections undertaken last year fell to 25,703.

In response to the restrictions some local authorities, including Kildare County Council, have piloted virtual inspections. While virtual inspection systems present certain challenges and limitations, they do offer a way of improving the standard of rental accommodation despite the pandemic. I support these initiatives and my Department has provided Exchequer funding to local authorities participating in the pilot projects.

The lifting of pandemic restrictions has permitted the resumption of on-site inspections since 14 July 2021.

The number of private rental inspections undertaken by Kildare County Council in the years; 2019, 2020 and to Q3 2021 is set out in the table below:

Year	Physi-calon-site Rental Inspections Carried Out	Virtual-Rental Inspections Carried Out	TotalRen-tal Inspec-tions Car-ried Out	Improve-mentLet-ters Issued	Improve-ment Notices Served	Prohibition Notices Served
2019	1,261	-	1,261	1,125	38	13
2020	638	49	687	515	34	9
2021 to Q3	160	68	228	136	13	2

It should be noted that in terms of enforcement local authorities will typically try to work in partnership with landlords to ensure that any non-compliances are corrected. This is can be done outside of the more formal Improvement Letter/Notice system.

Annual data in respect of the level of inspections carried out by each local authority is available on my Department's website at:

www.gov.ie/en/publication/da3fe-private-housing-market-statistics/

Local Authorities

183. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of long-term leases approved to date in 2021 by local authority area including an average cost per unit for each local authority area; the number of leased properties in each local authority area that have a single owner; and the number of leased properties that are in multi-unit developments owned by a single individual or corporate entity or portfolios of properties owned by a single owner or corporate entity in tabular form. [56659/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): To date in 2021, 130 leasing projects have been approved by my Department for delivery under the Long Term Leasing and Enhanced Leasing Schemes over the period 2021 to 2023. A breakdown of these approvals by local authority, detailing the term of the agreement and number of units is set out in Table 1 attached.

The average cost of all long term leases approved in 2021 is €16,500. My Department does not release specific cost information at a project level as these transactions are commercially sensitive and contain proprietary information that may impact on the competitiveness of the local authority sector.

Applications under the leasing programme are made to the relevant local authority who assess each application. Where the application is for more than 4 properties or when leasing from an AHB, the local authority must apply to my Department for approval before entering into any agreement. The entities from whom the houses are leased is a matter for the relevant local authority and details of the owner involved in each social housing leasing project are not held by my Department.

Details on social housing delivery for each local authority, across a range of delivery mechanisms, are included in social housing statistics published by my Department. This data is available to the end of Quarter 2 2021 and is available on the statistics page of my Department's website, at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/collection/6060e-overall-social-housing-provision/

LA	Number of Approvals	Number of LTL Units	Number Part V Lease Units	Average Agreement Length
Carlow Co. Co.	2.	16	0	25 years
Cavan Co. Co.	2.	10	0	17.5 years
Clare Co. Co.	5.	8	0	22 years
Cork City Co.	9.	78	0	25 years
Cork Co. Co.	3.	6	0	25 years
DLR Co. Co.	6.	80	0	25 years
Donegal Co. Co.	3.	14	0	10 years
Dublin City Co.	30.	638	39	25 years
Fingal Co. Co.	3.	64	110	23.3 years
Galway Co. Co.	1.	11	0	25 years
Kerry Co. Co.	1.	13	0	25 years
Kildare Co. Co.	12.	381	13	23.75 years
Laois Co. Co.	2.	10	0	17.5 years
Limerick Co. Co.	10.	34	0	24.5 years
Louth Co. Co.	5.	68	0	25 years
Mayo Co. Co.	1.	13	0	25 years
Meath Co. Co.	2.	39	0	25 years
Roscommon Co. Co.	1.	10	0	25 years
South Dublin Co. Co.	20.	108	0	25 years
Tipperary Co. Co.	1.	4	0	25 years
Westmeath Co. Co.	2.	6	0	25 years
Wexford Co. Co.	6.	12	0	16.66 years
Wicklow Co. Co.	3.	164	0	25 years

Departmental Expenditure

184. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the housing capital underspend to date in 2021; the amount he expects will be carried forward into 2022; if this will exceed the 10% cap; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56663/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department reports to Government on a quarterly basis on Capital expenditure. To the end of September the Capital Expenditure for Vote 34, Housing, Local Government and Heritage is €1,029m which is €334m or 25% behind the published profile of €1,363m.

Capital expenditure in 2021 progressed slower than profiled as a result of a restricted operating environment under Covid-19 health and safety protocols. The Finance Act 2004, section 91, provides for the carryover of up to 10% of the REV allocation (Capital) from one year to

the next.

For 2022, I have confirmed to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform that I am seeking full capital carryover of 10%, amounting to €275.8m. The details of the source and subsequent allocation of that funding will be published in the REV later this year.

Departmental Funding

185. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if funding is available from his Department to support local authorities in hosting fireworks displays at Halloween and on New Year's Eve. [56668/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): My Department does not provide dedicated funding for such matters. However, from time to time small amounts of funding may be allocated from the Local Government Fund for stand alone events with local authority involvement, subject to available resources and other funding priorities.

Foreshore Issues

186. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of foreshore licence applications by Irish Water which have been received in the past 12 months; the time involved in processing of these applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56710/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): Irish Water have in the past twelve months submitted two applications for a Foreshore Licence to my Department for assessment under the Foreshore Act 1933, as amended. These applications are as follows:

Details of both applications can be viewed on my Departments website at www.housing.gov.ie .

The assessment of the applications for a foreshore consent involves several steps; including public and prescribed bodies consultation, environmental assessment under the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive and the Birds and Habitats Directive in particular, valuation, a technical review by the Marine Licence Vetting Committee (MLVC) and a consideration of public interest matters.

It would not be appropriate for me to comment on applications that will come before me for decision. The time it takes to complete the assessment of applications varies considerably depending on the complexity of the application, the issues raised in the public consultation process and the time it takes to consider any additional information that may be required from the applicant as part of the statutory assessment processes.

My Department is in regular contact with Irish Water in relation to these applications and the Department's website will be updated as these applications reach the various key milestones in the assessment process.

Compulsory Purchase Orders

187. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he is considering legislative changes that would enable statutory bodies to proceed with planning applications for public infrastructure whilst simultaneously pursuing compulsory purchase orders on the lands to be developed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56711/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): My Department is aware of ongoing issues with respect to proposed developments of strategic public infrastructure, specifically in relation to developments by statutory bodies which have CPO powers. The matter is currently being looked into and requires legal advice on any proposed amendments to the planning code which might enable statutory bodies to undertake their statutory functions while also having regard to the rights of individual property owners.

Following the receipt of the legal advice, a decision will be made on whether legislative changes are an appropriate mechanism to assist in this matter.

Nitrates Usage

188. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if Ireland has formally communicated a request for a new nitrates derogation to the European Commission pursuant to Council Directive 91/676/EEC; if so, the basis on which it was determined appropriate to apply for such a derogation in advance of the finalisation of a new nitrates action plan; if he will provide this Deputy with the documents supporting the request for a new derogation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56761/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Ireland notified the European Commission of its intention to apply for a renewal of its derogation under the Nitrates Directive at the Nitrates Management Committee meeting on 25th September 2020. Ireland formally wrote to the European Commission on 13th October 2021 requesting a renewal of the derogation.

The purpose of the derogation is to provide for higher stocking densities on certain farms, on application, subject to more stringent environmental requirements and enhanced enforcement and inspection programmes. Any derogation decision proposed by the Commission is based on measures that build on the protection levels provided in the national Nitrates Action Programme

As part of the preparation of the next Nitrates Action Programme my Department recently conducted a public consultation process. This followed on from an initial public consultation which was held in late 2020.

Officials from my Department, along with colleagues from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine are still in discussions with the Commission on the review of Ireland's Nitrates Action Programme, and this process incorporates negotiations on the renewal of Ireland's derogation. Both the Nitrates Action Programme and the derogation are complementary control mechanisms and it is prudent to engage with the Commission on the derogation before the Nitrates Action Programme is finalised to ensure the measures in the derogation are robust and effective in providing enhanced environmental protection.

The letter of 13th October requesting a renewal of Ireland's derogation is attached for the Deputy's information. Due to the confidential nature of the ongoing negotiations with the European Commission, I am unable to make available the supporting documentation at this time. However, once the negotiation process has fully concluded I can again consider the Deputy's

request.

[Derogation]

Water Quality

189. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his attention has been drawn to the fact that three towns in County Wexford were subject to boil water notices due to the lack of ultraviolet treatment facilities in the water plants serving these towns; if he will ensure that funding is provided to Irish Water to install these urgently needed facilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56813/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Since 1 January 2014, Irish Water has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local levels. The prioritisation and progression of individual projects is a matter for determination by Irish Water.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is responsible for enforcing compliance with EU Directives and national regulations for the provision of drinking water.

However, from enquiries which my Department has made with Irish Water, I understand that precautionary Boil Water Notices had issued in the Creagh/Gorey, Newtown/Wexford and the Vinegar Hill/Enniscorthy areas following consultation between Irish Water, Wexford County Council and the Health Service Executive (HSE).

While the boil water notice for the Vinegar Hill/Enniscorthy was lifted earlier this month, I am pleased to note that the boil water notice for the Newtown/Wexford area was also lifted this week (Wednesday, 17 November 2021)

In relation to Creagh/Gorey, Irish Water and Wexford County Council are continuing to work as a matter of priority to resolve this issue. Upgrade works have progressed on site and Irish Water hope to be in a position to request the lifting of the boil water notice this week. Once the monitoring results verify that drinking water quality is in compliance with the Drinking Water Regulations, then Irish Water will consult with the HSE to determine whether the Boil Water Notice can be lifted.

Irish Water is assessing the long-term solutions for these plants, which may include additional UV treatment systems were necessary. The progression of these works will be a matter for Irish Water and its water quality regulator, the EPA.

As part of Budget 2022, I secured funding of over €1.57 billion to support water services. This includes €1.459 billion (Current €629m and Capital €830m) in respect of domestic water services provision by Irish Water.

Finally, it may be helpful to note that Irish Water has established a dedicated team to deal with representations and queries from public representatives. The team can be contacted via email to oireachtasmembers@water.ie or by telephone on a dedicated number, 1890 578 578.

Horticulture Sector

190. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heri-

tage when the final report of the working group on the use of peat moss in the horticultural industry will be published; the reason for its delay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56820/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): My statutory remit and responsibility as Minister does not include regulation of the harvesting or supply of horticultural peat. However, to assist in addressing the important issues around horticultural peat for domestic purposes, I set up an Independent Working Group under the Chair of Dr. Munoo Prasad. The potential of alternatives to the use of peat moss in the horticultural industry was examined extensively by the group, together with a number of related issues.

I received the final report of the Chair of the Independent Working Group on the 20th October. The contents are now being considered carefully with a view to publishing the report in due course. I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Dr. Prasad, the members of the working group and all who contributed to the report.

Derelict Sites

191. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the work being carried out to collect the almost €60,000 in unpaid derelict sites levies in County Tipperary; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56822/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): The Derelict Sites Act 1990 confers significant powers upon local authorities to tackle the problem of dereliction in our towns and cities. The application of the Derelict Sites Levy is only one of these powers, which also include requiring owners or occupiers to take appropriate measures on derelict sites and acquiring derelict sites by agreement or compulsorily. It is a matter for each local authority to determine the most appropriate use of the legislation within their respective functional areas.

My Department has been in contact with Tipperary County Council in this regard. It has reported that it applies the Derelict Site levies on properties that are included on the Derelict Site Register and located in prescribed areas, which involves, inter alia, the following steps:

- Each Financial year a levy demand is issued to registered property owners in January / February.

- If payment is not received, a reminder letter is issued.

- If levies still remain unpaid, interest is charged and recorded within the Council's financial management system, as allowed for in Section 23 of the Derelict Sites Act 1990.

- Staff have ongoing engagement with property owners (including levied property owners) to try to recover levies and get properties remediated and removed from the Derelict Sites Register.

- Difficulties in collecting levies can stem from ownership/probate issues, which can take time to resolve, and from hardship cases, for which a provision to suspend the levy is included in section 26 of the Derelict Sites Act 1990.

My Department intends to engage with local authorities in order to ensure more proactive and effective enforcement of the provisions of the legislation, and is keeping the legislative

provisions under review.

Northern Ireland

192. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has had discussions with the Minister for Justice in Northern Ireland or with the Secretary of State for Justice in Britain in relation to the unacceptable proposal by the British Government to introduce an amnesty for persons who committed crimes during the era of the Troubles in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51632/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): It has been the consistent position of the Government that the Stormont House Agreement provides a balanced and comprehensive framework to address the painful legacy of the Troubles based on the principles of truth, justice, rule of law and reconciliation. Progress on its implementation is crucial, for families and victims and for society as a whole. It was agreed in 2014 by both Governments and the political parties after intensive negotiations, and it should be implemented.

Where the British Government propose significant changes to the Stormont House framework, these must be discussed and agreed by both Governments and the parties to the Northern Ireland Executive. Only through a collective approach can we hope to deal with these issues comprehensively and fairly and in a way that responds to the needs of victims, survivors and society.

Following a meeting of the British Irish Intergovernmental Conference on 24 June, we agreed to begin an intensive process of engagement with the British Government and the Northern Ireland parties to find an agreed way forward. Discussions began in July and since then, officials of the Department of Foreign Affairs have met a broad range of stakeholders. Importantly, this process has engaged fully with victims' representatives. The intention is to find an agreed way forward that will allow implementing legislation to be introduced in both the UK and Ireland.

The proposals published by the British Government on 14 July for a 'Statute of Limitations', ending criminal investigations and prosecutions relating to Troubles-related incidents, as well as inquests and civil litigation, have caused significant upset, shock and concern. They represent a very radical departure from the Stormont House Agreement and we do not accept them as the basis of a way forward. It is important to say that there has been a clear message from victims groups throughout this process that this cannot be the way forward. It has also been strongly and publicly opposed by all the parties.

I have engaged regularly with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Brandon Lewis, who is leading for the British Government on these proposals, including a meeting in person on 3 September in relation to the ongoing legacy engagement process. I also met with the Minister for Justice in Northern Ireland, Naomi Long, on 16 September during which legacy, amongst other issues, was discussed.

It is the position of the Government that there should be effective investigations into all Troubles-related deaths, regardless of the perpetrator. The rule of law and the protections afforded by the European Convention on Human Rights must apply equally to everyone and must be upheld, and this principle is at the core of the Stormont House framework.

We have strongly communicated our position on this issue to the British Government and will continue to do so, and to caution in the clearest terms against any unilateral action. The Government will continue to engage and work with the British Government and the parties

represented on the Northern Ireland Executive on this very important issue in the period immediately ahead.

Foreign Conflicts

193. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which he has been able to highlight the level of violence against women and children both in conflict zones and non-conflict zones globally during his discussions with his European colleagues. [48343/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I wish to thank the Deputy for this parliamentary question and refer him to the previous response to his parliamentary question 47401/21, which provides information on this matter.

Consular Services

194. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if an enumeration has been done of the number of Irish nationals living and working in Singapore currently seeking permission to return home but are encountering difficulties obtaining the relevant permission to re-enter Singapore; if the necessary assistance can be provided to these persons to ensure there is no discrimination occurring against Irish nationals wishing to re-enter Singapore to return to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56593/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Government is committed to doing everything possible to support and facilitate the resumption of safe international air travel, and especially to ensure that Irish citizens living abroad are able to return home to Ireland for visits and to reunite with friends and family here.

Singapore determines its own policies and regulations on who can enter that country and what measures and conditions apply. Ireland is currently in Category II in the Singapore Government 'Safe Travel' system, meaning that vaccinated Irish citizens living in Singapore who re-enter Singapore from Ireland are required to serve a 7-day 'Stay Home Notice' at their place of residence. Furthermore, passengers, other than Singapore citizens and Permanent Residents, must apply for entry/re-entry approval in advance of travel.

Singapore has 'Vaccinated Travel Lane' arrangements with a number of countries. The Irish Government has made a formal request that quarantine-free entry be extended to vaccinated travellers from Ireland, and we have been advised by the Singapore authorities that this matter is under active consideration.

In recent weeks, we became aware that some Irish citizens planning travel home to Ireland over Christmas and the New Year were encountering difficulties in securing the necessary re-entry approvals in January. Our Ambassador in Singapore raised this issue with the Singapore authorities and asked for their assistance in resolving it. I am pleased to advise the Deputy that we have now been assured that Irish citizens seeking re-entry in January should be able to receive same. If the Deputy has details of any specific cases where a problem persists, my Department will be happy to receive these and pass them on to our Ambassador for follow-up locally.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and our Embassy in Singapore will continue to prioritise these issues, which I know are of great concern to our diaspora community in Singapore.

Foreign Birth Registration

195. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of plans to re-open the foreign birth registration application process in order that the application for persons (details supplied) can be considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56620/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department is responsible for citizenship by descent through the Foreign Births Register under the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956, as amended.

I am pleased to inform the Deputy that as of Monday 15th November, the processing of Foreign Birth Registration has resumed and will be gradually scaling up in line with the recruitment of additional resources. Foreign Birth Registration applications are citizenship applications and as in all jurisdictions involve a complex and lengthy process.

The applications referenced were registered on 16 March 2021, and are being stored in a secure environment.

FBR staff continue to provide an emergency service for Foreign Birth Registration in cases of exceptional urgency, such as expectant parents, or stateless persons. Such applicants may contact the Passport Service directly.

My Department is fully committed to allocating additional resources over the coming period to assist with the processing of the high volume of new applications anticipated and the 32,000 Foreign Birth Registration applications currently on hand.

Passport Services

196. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the reason a simple online adult passport renewal application by a person (details supplied) has been given an estimated target issue date of ten weeks from the receipt of the application considering that this persons last passport expired only months ago so it should only take ten working days for this application to be processed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56676/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): With regard to the specific application about which the Deputy has enquired, the applicant mistakenly applied for a first time passport when completing the application form online. As a result, the estimated issue date given is in line with processing times for first time applications.

The Passport Service has contacted the applicant and informed them of what is required to progress their passport application.

Passport Services

197. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his attention has been drawn to the current difficulties surrounding the emergency passport service; if his Department is reviewing the emergency telephone line to increase capacity due to large volume of callers; if persons can get an immediate urgent appointment with the passport office; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56699/21]

215. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which he can put in place an effective turnaround for applications for passport renewals or new pass-

port applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56791/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 197 and 215 together.

The Passport Service Customer Service centre has been operational since June 2021 in line with the scaling up of passport operations as pandemic restrictions were eased. Currently, 75 officers are responding to customer queries by phone and webchat as well as with enquiries related to Emergency Passport cases.

Since June, Customer Service officers have responded to 130,000 queries from customers. In October, the Customer Service Hub handled 27,000 enquiries from customers. The Passport Service very much regrets that on days of very high volume of passport queries, people have had difficulty contacting them. As a result, my Department is actively working to recruit and assign additional staff to improve our service and meet current and expected demand.

The Emergency Passport service is available free of charge in cases of medical emergency or death of a family member abroad. Proof of emergency is required to avail of this service. In cases of genuine and documented emergency, every effort is made to assist the applicant. In October alone 4,600 Emergency Passport cases were handled by the Customer Service Team.

Additionally, the Passport Offices in Mount St, Dublin 2 and in Cork now offer an Urgent Appointment Service for the renewal of passports. The Urgent Appointment Service ensures that, for those who unexpectedly require a very urgent turnaround of a passport renewal, there is an option available that is transparent, predictable and clear. It means that an applicant can book and pay for their appointment, safe in the knowledge that they will have their passport within a day, or a few days. To avail of the Urgent Appointment Service for Passport Renewal, applicants must first book an appointment to attend the public office in Dublin or Cork through the Department of Foreign Affairs website (www.dfa.ie/passports). Over 800 urgent appointments have been facilitated since the Passport Service launched this service on 27th September 2021.

Passport Service operations were severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, as were many Government services. Despite the consequences of the pandemic, the Passport Service has issued over half a million passports to date in 2021 and 45% of simple adult renewals issue within one business day.

My Department attaches the highest priority to ensuring that the Passport Service is resourced to respond to current and anticipated high demand for passports. My Department is actively working with the Public Appointments Service to recruit and assign additional permanent and temporary staff between now and the end of January 2022, bringing total staff numbers to 920 and effectively doubling the number of staff at the Passport Service. I am confident that these additional resources will help to improve customer experience and reduce turnaround times.

The Passport Service is working with relevant divisions within my Department to ensure the health and safety of all staff is prioritised alongside the business need to serve our citizens. Plans are at finalisation stage thanks to excellent co-operation from the Office of Public Works to ensure that additional staff will be accommodated to meet the anticipated unprecedented demand for passports in 2022.

The Passport Service continually examines how to improve processing times and engagement with applicants. Preparation is currently underway for several system and service improvements that will enhance the customer service experience and will improve processing times. These improvements will be rolled out in the coming weeks and months.

The current passport processing times are:

- 10 working days for Simple Adult online renewals

- 15 working days for Complex or child online renewals

- 40 working days for First Time Applications on Passport Online

- 8 weeks for An Post's mail-in "Passport Express" service

The aforementioned passport processing times are based on current average application turnaround times and relate to passport applications submitted to the Passport Service with required supporting documentation. When passport applicants do not provided all of the requisite documentation to the Passport Service, it takes much longer to process the application and issue a passport.

Currently, there are 108,000 passport applications on hand at the Passport Service. Of the online applications on hand, 34,000 or 35% of applications are incomplete and the onus is on the applicant to submit the required documents to the Service. The Passport Service contacts applicants who have not submitted the requisite documentation. However, the Passport Service must wait in those 34,000 cases until the applicants submit the outstanding documentation that is required. While the Passport Service makes every effort to contact applicants in such circumstances, their experience is that many applicants take weeks and sometimes months to send in the necessary documents.

The Passport Service is attaching particular priority to the nearly 7% of online applications which have not been issued on or before estimated issue date which was indicated to the applicant. Intensive work is underway to eliminate this problem and these delays are regretted very much by the Service.

The Passport Service is currently experiencing a high demand for first time passports. Out of a total of 108,000 passport applications currently on hand with the Passport Service, 70,000 or 64% of these are first time applications.

These first time applications are necessarily complex to process, since they are essentially applications for Irish citizenship. The Passport Service must validate the true identity of the applicant and take measures to confirm the applicant's entitlement to Irish citizenship. It is the statutory responsibility of the Passport Service to protect the integrity of the Irish passport. Accordingly, a rigorous analysis process is in place to verify the identity and citizenship status of applicants.

In the case of first time passport applications for children, the consent of guardians must also be thoroughly validated. Due to the intensive analysis underpinning first time online passport applications processing time is 40 working days.

In the context of the National Development Plan, my Department is making a major investment in the future of the Passport Service. Over the next couple of years, we will replace the core technology underpinning the service, which will deliver efficiencies and a more resilient passport system. Budget 2022 also included an investment of an additional €10m in passport services in response to the increasing demand for passports both at home and abroad.

I urge citizens to check the validity of their passports before booking travel and to ensure that they apply in plenty of time. In the case of people planning to travel in 2022, whose passports are already out of date or who have children who are first-time applicants, I would encourage them to apply now online.

Passport Online can be accessed by all first time applicants, irrespective of age both children and adults, in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Great Britain, Europe, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA. All Irish citizens, including children, can use the online system to renew their passports from anywhere in the world.

Northern Ireland

198. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which efforts continue to be made at all levels to ensure that the Northern Ireland peace process is not damaged by ongoing Brexit related developments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56773/21]

199. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which he has had discussions with the Northern Ireland and or the UK authorities with a view to ensuring that recent interpretations of Brexit are not allowed to damage the peace process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56774/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 198 and 199 together.

At an early stage in the Withdrawal Agreement negotiations, both the UK and the EU acknowledged the unique circumstances on the island of Ireland, recognising the necessity of protecting the gains of the peace process, including avoiding a hard border and protecting North-South cooperation. To recall, the Protocol is the joint EU-UK solution to mitigate against the disruption Brexit causes for citizens and businesses on the island of Ireland. It is an integral part of the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement and the result of over four years of difficult negotiation. It was designed and agreed by the UK and the EU to safeguard the Good Friday Agreement and gains of the peace process, and to protect the integrity of the EU Single Market and Ireland's place in it. Discussions between the EU and the UK on the Protocol, including between UK Minister David Frost and Commission Vice President Maros Šefcovic, are ongoing. Our aim is to see a positive outcome to these discussions. I am in regular and ongoing contact with political leaders and representatives of business and civil society in Northern Ireland in relation to the implementation of the Protocol. Last week, the Taoiseach also had a series of calls with the leaders of the Northern Ireland political parties, to discuss the current situation regarding talks on the Protocol. He highlighted the EU's commitment to addressing genuine implementation issues around the Protocol and emphasised that the ongoing talks between the EU and the UK should be given every chance to succeed. Support for the Commission package and minimising disruption remains strong in Northern Ireland, particularly among the business community. Recent polling on attitudes to the Protocol in Northern Ireland show that a majority of people view the Protocol as a good thing for Northern Ireland and that people, across communities, support "ongoing solution seeking" and a pragmatic approach. I am also very aware of stakeholders' views on opportunities that the Protocol offers for Northern Ireland, giving them access to both the UK as well as the EU internal markets. Realising the opportunities presented by the Protocol, as our economies build back from the impact of COVID-19, should be the focus of our energy at this time. The Commission's recent proposals address concerns raised by unionists, including significantly reducing checks on goods moving between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and giving Northern Ireland a greater say in how the Protocol is implemented. It is also important to reiterate that the Protocol recognises the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, as set out in the Good Friday Agreement. I have met with Minister Frost on a number of occasions in recent months, most recently in September, at the meeting of the British Irish Association in Oxford. I have also discussed the Protocol in meetings with other UK ministers,

including with Foreign Secretary Elizabeth Truss on 13 October and the Minister for Europe and Americas at the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, Wendy Morton, on 1 October. Other Ministers have also regularly raised the Protocol with UK counterparts in recent contacts.In all contacts with relevant stakeholders, I have emphasised the importance of using the EU-UK framework for issues related to the Protocol and of finding a solution that works for the people of Northern Ireland. We are impressing on them that invoking Article 16 would have far-reaching implications for the EU-UK relationship and for our bilateral relationship. The European Commission has acted in good faith. A good faith response is required from the British Government.I am of course also in regular contact with Vice President Šefcovic, with our partners across the EU, and the US Administration and members of Congress, all of whom remain committed to protecting the Good Friday Agreement and the gains of the peace process. The Protocol is the agreed way to do this and I believe strongly that the Protocol will work, if we allow it to with flexibility and pragmatism.

Question No. 199 answered with Question No. 198.

Brexit Issues

200. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if political and economic issues that have arisen in the aftermath of Brexit have become problematic given that pre-Brexit no such situations arose; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56775/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Government has dedicated substantial time and resources into preparing for the political and economic effects of Brexit since 2016. The Withdrawal Agreement, including the Protocol on Ireland / Northern Ireland, and the Trade and Cooperation Agreement agreed by the EU and the UK mitigate many of the potential political and economic issues that might have arisen as a result of Brexit. The Trade and Cooperation Agreement provides for tariff-free, quota-free trade in goods and for sectoral cooperation in a number of important areas.

The Protocol is the agreed solution to mitigate the disruption caused by Brexit for the island of Ireland. It safeguards the Good Friday Agreement, ensures there is no hard border on the island of Ireland and also protects the EU single market and Ireland's place in it.

On 13 October, the Commission announced a package of far-reaching proposals aimed at addressing the practical, genuine issues raised by businesses and citizens in Northern Ireland. Discussions continue between the EU and the UK. Ireland wants these discussions to succeed and is fully supportive of the Commission's approach.

The Government undertook an intensive effort across departments and agencies to mitigate the disruption caused by Brexit. This included the development of two Brexit Omnibus Acts; three Brexit Action Plans; substantial investment in the State's infrastructure and IT systems (including provision for 1,500 additional staff to support new checks and controls); and the provision of financial, upskilling and advisory supports for impacted sectors and businesses. Throughout the Brexit process, our readiness work was always underpinned by a strong communications and outreach programme.

However, no Government mitigation programme can address all of the challenges of Brexit. Even with the Withdrawal Agreement and the Trade and Cooperation Agreement in place, the seamless trade in goods with Great Britain has ceased due to the UK Government's decision to leave the Customs Union and Single Market.

The Government keeps the outworking of the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement and the Trade

and Cooperation Agreement under ongoing review and, as we have done throughout the Brexit process, we will remain fully engaged with stakeholders and support businesses as they continue to navigate the Brexit challenges. A range of financial, upskilling and advisory supports for impacted sectors and businesses remain available. In particular, the Government is currently assisting traders in their preparations for the introduction of further UK import controls on 1 January and 1 July 2022.

Brexit Issues

201. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent of recent discussions he has had with the UK Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union to ensure that a renegotiation of the UK interpretation of Brexit is not allowed to damage the economy and security on the island of Ireland and with particular reference to Northern Ireland given the excellent state of both economies pre-Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56776/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I have met with UK Minister of State David Frost on a number of occasions in the last year, most recently in September, at the meeting of the British Irish Association in Oxford. I have also discussed the Protocol in meetings with other UK ministers, including with the UK Foreign Secretary Elizabeth Truss on 13 October and the Minister for Europe and Americas at the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, Wendy Morton, on 1 October. The issue has also been regularly raised by other Ministers in recent contacts with UK counterparts.

In all contacts with UK ministers and officials, I have emphasised the importance of avoiding any actions that would have far-reaching implications for both the EU-UK relationship and, in turn, our bilateral relationship. The European Commission has acted in good faith. A good faith response is required from the United Kingdom Government. I have called on the UK Government to engage seriously and constructively in talks with the EU so that we can provide stability and predictability for businesses and citizens in Northern Ireland.

Discussions between the EU and UK on the Northern Ireland Protocol including between David Frost and Maros Šefcovic are ongoing and it is important that we give these talks every chance to succeed. Our aim is to see a positive outcome to these discussions.

The Government keeps the outworkings of the Withdrawal Agreement including the Protocol and the Trade and Cooperation Agreement under on-going review and, as we have done throughout the Brexit process, we will remain fully engaged with stakeholders and support businesses as they continue to navigate the Brexit challenges.

I remain in regular contact with business, civic society and political stakeholders in Northern Ireland and I am very aware of their views about the opportunities that the Protocol offers for Northern Ireland, giving them access to both the UK as well as the EU internal markets. Surveys show that two-thirds of NI businesses see the opportunity in this. We are seeing historically high FDI interest in Northern Ireland. We need to use the Protocol to deliver on a prosperity agenda for the people of Northern Ireland. Realising these opportunities, as our economies build back from the impact of Covid, should be the focus of our energy at this time.

International Protection

202. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps he can

take through the European Union or United Nations to address the refugee crisis in eastern Europe; if these matters can be dealt with at the highest level to ensure the maintenance of basic humanitarian standards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56777/21]

203. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the degree to which he can activate the European Union and the United Nations to address the issue of refugees including women and children currently remaining in life threatening situations on the borders of Poland and the Baltic states; his views on whether it is possible to mount an international campaign to address the issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56778/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 202 and 203 together.

Ireland condemns the regime of Alexander Lukashenko for its exploitation of migrants for political purposes.

At the November Foreign Affairs Council meeting, EU Foreign Ministers discussed the escalation in the crisis along the EU's borders with Belarus. We took swift action and agreed to broaden the listings criteria for sanctions on the Belarusian regime.

This broader listing will target individuals and entities organising or contributing to activities by the Lukashenko regime that facilitate illegal crossing of the EU's external borders.

Ireland also supports EU outreach to countries of origin to stem the flow of migrants to Belarus, by communicating the considerable risks and dangers associated with facilitating irregular migration. I am hopeful that in the coming weeks the EU's continuing engagement will result in a diminishing flow of migrants to Belarus.

While the current humanitarian crisis has been orchestrated by the Belarusian regime, it is important that EU Member States respect and uphold the right to international protection in line with obligations under the Geneva Conventions. Ireland has expressed its support for the deployment of experts from Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, to the border region. International organisations, aid workers and independent monitors and journalists should be allowed to access both sides of the border, in our view.

Ireland has repeatedly demonstrated our solidarity with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, and with those trapped at the border. Just three weeks ago, Minister of State Byrne visited the Lithuanian-Belarussian border, accompanied by members of the Lithuanian Government. As part of that visit, he viewed some migrant camps that have been established by the Lithuanian Government, met with the Lithuanian Border Guards and also with the Lithuanian Red Cross, which, this year, has received a contribution of €100,000 from Irish Aid to help provide relief to the migrants.

At the request of Ireland, France and Estonia, the three EU members of the UN Security Council, the Council held an AOB discussion on Belarus on 11 November, focused on the ongoing migration issue there. Ireland expressed concern about the deteriorating situation at the EU-Belarus border, condemned the instrumentalisation of migrants for political purposes by the Belarusian authorities, and highlighted the need to prevent a humanitarian crisis unfolding. The EU members of the Council, joined by Norway, the UK, and the US, as well as incoming Council member Albania, held a press stakeout after the meeting, stressing that all actions must be guided by fundamental values, especially regarding the protection of migrants' human rights.

Question No. 203 answered with Question No. 202.

Human Rights

204. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the top 20 locations worldwide that are experiencing violations of human rights, lack of protection against starvation and the organised equivalent of ethnic cleansing; if the perpetrators are likely to be charged before the International Criminal Courts of Justice and Human Rights; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56779/21]

205. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if serious efforts can be made to ensure that those encouraging the use of human rights abuses against vulnerable persons can be challenged in the international courts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56780/21]

210. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the degree to which at European Union and United Nations level he continues to focus on the vulnerability of women and children who continue to fall victims to physical and mental abuse; the steps being taken to address these issues and incarcerate the perpetrators; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56786/21]

212. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which he continues to raise at European Union Security Council level the ongoing worldwide abuses of women and children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56788/21]

213. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the efforts that are being made at international level to challenge the activities of international abuses of human rights; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56789/21]

214. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which he through the United Nations and the European Union can continue to highlight abuses of human rights at various locations throughout the globe some in warzones and some not in which vulnerable persons continue to be abused, trafficked and murdered; if efforts have been made to bring the perpetrators to justice; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56790/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 204, 205, 210, 212, 213 and 214 together.

The promotion and protection of human rights is a foreign policy priority for me as Minister, and for the wider Government. As well as bilaterally through our mission network, Ireland contributes strongly to United Nations and European Union efforts to eliminate human rights violations and abuses. The rights of women and children are central to our engagement, especially in conflict zones where risks of child recruitment or trafficking in persons are particularly prevalent. At the UN Security Council this month alone, Ireland highlighted human rights concerns in discussions on, inter alia, Ethiopia, Syria and Yemen.

Conflict remains the most significant driver of humanitarian crises, while the number and complexity of these crises globally continues to increase. Each conflict is unique in its character, scale and complexity, and as such cannot be ranked by any single set of criteria of severity.

The particular human rights violations and abuses encountered by women and children, including sexual and gender-based violence, crosscuts all of Ireland's engagement on both conflict and human rights. In addition to co-chairing the UN Security Council's Informal Expert Group on Women, Peace and Security, Ireland is an active member of the UN Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. During our Presidency of the Security Council in September, we set a record in respect of the number of women civil society participants

that we invited to brief the Council.

Ireland is currently actively engaged in the Third Committee session of the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, which is addressing a range of social, humanitarian affairs and human rights issues including gender equality and the rights of the child. We have delivered a series of statements, including on trafficking in persons, the rights of persons with disabilities, the right to freedom of expression and opinion, and the situation of human rights defenders; as well as in relation to specific country situations including Myanmar, Belarus and the occupied Palestinian Territories. Ireland co-sponsored a significant number of resolutions, including in relation to the human rights situations in Syria, Iran, DPRK and Myanmar, and joined joint statements in relation to the human rights of LGBTI+ persons and the human rights situation in Xinjiang. We are active at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) and, at the most recent session, made national statements on a broad range of issues, including violence against women and children's rights. Ireland also co-sponsored several resolutions including a resolution on child, early and forced marriage in times of crisis (including the COVID-19 pandemic). In the context of increased authoritarian restrictions globally, Ireland will also join a Joint Statement supporting the right to peaceful protest.

At EU level, Ireland is an active participant and contributor to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, which works globally to support the preservation of peace, the prevention of conflicts and the strengthening of international security. Human Rights issues are frequently discussed at the EU Foreign Affairs Council. Most recently, on Monday, 15 November, in a discussion on Ethiopia at the FAC, I repeated my concerns in relation to the human rights situation, urging a strong EU response. Ireland strongly support the EU's Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, which strengthens the EU's ability to take collective action against perpetrators of human rights violations.

Finally, it is a priority for Ireland that there is accountability for human rights violations, including for the heinous crimes of genocide and ethnic cleansing. A strong international criminal justice system is central to fighting impunity. While states bear the primary responsibility to investigate the most serious international crimes, including war crimes and genocide, Ireland regards the International Criminal Court as the cornerstone of such a system. We are a consistent and strong supporter of the Court.

In respect of peacekeeping, Ireland also has a long tradition of contributing to UN and EU peace-support missions and has more than 550 personnel in United Nations mandated missions overseas.

Question No. 205 answered with Question No. 204.

International Protection

206. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which an organisation (details supplied) can be encouraged to assist refugees converging on the Baltic states; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56781/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Further to my earlier response to the Deputy, I emphasise again that Ireland condemns the regime of Alexander Lukashenko for its exploitation of migrants.

Earlier this year, Irish Aid responded to the migrant crisis in the Lithuania-Belarus border region by providing €100,000 in humanitarian assistance to the International Federation of the Red Cross for transmission to the local Lithuanian Red Cross Society.

In addition, the International Federation of Red Cross launched an operation through their Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) to assist refugees in Lithuania. Ireland is a regular contributor to the DREF and contributed €1 million to this fund in 2021.

The International Federation of the Red Cross is the world's largest humanitarian organisation, comprising 192 Red Cross and Red Crescent member societies, and reaches 150 million people annually through 17 million volunteers, members and staff. The Federation coordinates relief operations to assist victims of disasters, and combines this with development work to strengthen the capacities of its member National Societies. In 2020 Irish Aid provided €3.4m in funding to the IFRC in core funding and in response to humanitarian crises and emergencies.

Foreign Conflicts

207. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which the activities of Boko Haram are being or can be curtailed or restricted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56782/21]

208. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which the activities of Al Shabaab are being restricted, curtailed or challenged with particular reference to the need to protect their victims; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56783/21]

209. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which the kidnapping of women and children by Boko Haram is being challenged and restricted and the perpetrators incarcerated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56785/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 207, 208 and 209 together.

I strongly condemn the continued violence perpetrated by Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab. Ireland supports EU, UN and other international efforts to reduce their influence, and to prevent their attacks, especially against civilians, and humanitarian workers and facilities.

Through the Irish Aid programme and as an EU Member State, my Department is helping address the poverty, hunger and exclusion which can generate support for these groups, as well as responding to humanitarian need in regions affected by conflict. This includes €27 million in Irish Aid humanitarian funding to the Lake Chad region since 2015. Irish Aid also supports those displaced by conflict in northeast Nigeria, where the numbers in need of humanitarian assistance and protection are at the highest levels recorded.

Through the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) and the UN Peacebuilding Commission, the United Nations is helping stabilise the situation in the Lake Chad region. Ireland is penholder, together with Niger, on the UNOWAS file at the UN Security Council. In its Presidential Statement on the consolidation of peace in West Africa, of 17 August 2021, the UN Security Council strongly condemned continued attacks against civilians in the region, as well as attacks and the threats of attacks against schools, children, and educational personnel, including with regard to recent abductions in Nigeria.

Ireland's membership of the International Support Group for the Regional Stabilisation Strategy for the Lake Chad Basin, and observer status at the Sahel Alliance, allows us to work with others to coordinate our support to Boko Haram-affected areas of the Lake Chad Basin.

Since 2012, Ireland has provided over €56.6 million in humanitarian assistance to Somalia, including to communities displaced by conflict in Al Shabaab-held areas. The UN-mandated,

African Union-led peacekeeping mission in Somalia, AMISOM, supports the Federal Government of Somalia in its efforts against Al-Shabaab.

Ireland is Chair of the Somalia Sanctions Committee at the UN Security Council. That Committee oversees an arms embargo and the use of other tools to encourage a more peaceful and secure Somalia. This complements Ireland's role as an EU Member State supporting Somalia, including the strengthening of its government institutions.

The EU has three missions in the Horn of Africa. A number of Irish nationals are deployed to the civilian mission EUCAP Somalia, including the current Head of Mission, and one expert is deployed to the civilian mission EUCAP Sahel Niger. Twenty Irish Permanent Defence Forces personnel participate in EUTM Mali, and a further fourteen are deployed to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Ireland's participation in these missions allows us to contribute to peace and security, help protect human rights, and put in place conditions for sustainable development.

Question No. 208 answered with Question No. 207.

Question No. 209 answered with Question No. 207.

Question No. 210 answered with Question No. 204.

Irish Aid

211. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which Irish Aid continues to target the appropriate locations globally with particular reference to ensuring that both multilateral and bilateral aid reaches those for whom it was intended; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56787/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy): Ireland's Official Development Assistance (ODA), is directed through multilateral and bilateral channels, to countries and people who are in greatest need. A Better World, Ireland's international development policy, emphasizes this approach throughout. The policy confirms Ireland's emphasis on the key sectors that affect the poorest most, such as education, health, and food, and a commitment to ensuring gender equality and climate action is addressed. A Better World also commits to the overarching objective of reaching those that are furthest behind first in all our work.

Our ability to follow-through on these commitments in practice is evident in, for example, the high proportion of Irish Aid funding which targets least developed and low income countries. Where the average DAC member's bilateral allocation to these countries is just under one quarter, half of Irish ODA is bilateral aid to low income and least developed countries. Irish ODA also places a strong emphasis on fragile contexts.

Our commitment to, and ability to deliver on, a needs-based allocation of development assistance is also internationally recognised. In 2020, the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) highlighted Ireland as "an excellent humanitarian partner", with its funding models a "useful inspiration for other DAC donors". On average, around 20% of the Irish Aid budget each year is spent on humanitarian response.

Last year, the respected international think-tank ODI assessed the characteristics of ODA expenditure in leading donors and found Ireland to be the most principled donor, noting specifically Ireland's needs-based approach.

Question No. 212 answered with Question No. 204.

Question No. 213 answered with Question No. 204.

Question No. 214 answered with Question No. 204.

Question No. 215 answered with Question No. 197.

European Union

216. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which candidate countries for European Union membership continue to receive support for their cause; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56792/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland has always been, and will remain, a strong supporter of enlargement of the European Union, provided that candidate countries meet the necessary conditions for membership. We recognise the value of enlargement as a transformative driver for stability and peace in candidate countries. It was welcome that the draft Declaration adopted at the EU-Western Balkans Summit this year contained a clear signal of the continuing priority afford by the EU to the Enlargement dossier and to achieving early progress in advancing the accession process.

Serbia and Montenegro, which remain front-runners in terms of EU accession, both need to increase the dynamism in their reform agenda.

Both North Macedonia and Albania have clearly fulfilled the conditions necessary to commence accession negotiations. In our view, the negotiating frameworks for both countries should be agreed and Intergovernmental Conferences held as soon as possible to start the accession process.

Kosovo is a potential candidate for Membership of the EU. The Commission's report on Kosovo in 2021 noted that the political situation there remains challenging.

The EU has clearly set out the fourteen priority areas for reform which need to be progressed, if Bosnia and Herzegovina is to advance on its European path. The country's leaders now need to respond in pursuing the necessary reforms.

Ireland will continue to support strongly the enlargement process and offer any practical assistance it can to candidate countries engaged in accession negotiations to the EU.

Defence Forces

217. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Defence if he will consider using qualified members of the Defence Forces to address the urgency and shortage of staff in hospitals. [56754/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Whilst the Defence Forces are not a primary response agency for non-security related emergencies, as defined in the Framework for Major Emergency Management, they provide the fullest possible assistance to the appropriate Lead Department in the event of a natural disaster or emergency situation in its Aid to Civil Authority (ATCA) role. In this regard, the full spectrum of Defence Forces personnel and equipment, commensurate with operational requirements, is made available for deployments, within current means and capabilities, as the need arises.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a Joint Task Force (JTF) was established to coordinate the Defence Forces contribution to the whole-of-Government COVID-19 response. It has the authority to draw together, in a joint manner, the contribution of all of the elements of the Defence Forces – Army, Air Corps, Naval Service, Reserve, etc, under a single command structure. This was provided for in a Defence Forces Regulation signed by and under my authority as Minister for Defence.

The priority of the Defence Forces Joint Task Force from the beginning of the Covid 19 pandemic has been to provide support to the Health Service Executive (HSE), while retaining, at all times, a contingent capacity to provide Aid to the Civil Power support.

To date, the Defence Forces personnel have provided significant supports in response to the Covid-19 crisis, with in excess of 112,000 personnel days and there have 22,700 instances of Defence Forces vehicles being deployed in an extensive range of supports from the Defence Forces. This has provided surge support to our health services through bolstering their capacity and providing them with the additional resiliency needed to respond to the Covid 19 pandemic. The wide range of supports that the Defence Forces have provided to the HSE, as coordinated by the Joint Task Force during the COVID-19 crisis included:

- operation of the COVID-19 testing centre at the Aviva stadium;

- support for contact tracing efforts;transportation by the Air Corps of COVID-19 tests to Germany;

- collection of PPE from more than 260 cargo flights and the ongoing storage and distribution of this PPE to various HSE sites;

- support for HSE testing efforts including through deployment of Naval Service vessels to Dublin, Cork and Galway;

- PPE training to workers at Cork and Waterford harbours by Naval service personnel;

- provision of tentage and marshalling support at various HSE testing sites around the country;

- transportation of patients for testing;

- a range of non clinical and administrative supports in a number of residential care home facilities;

- assistance with the fit out of temporary facilities for the HSE (for example, the HSE facilities at City West and the University of Limerick);

- production and assembly of PPE using 3D printing facilities; and

- the use of lands at Ballymullen Barracks as a COVID-19 testing facility and contact tracing hub.

Vaccination Programme

The Defence Forces provided logistical and operational planning advice for the national vaccination programme.

Vaccinator support has been provided by the Defence Forces across a number of vaccination centres and Long Term Residential Care settings.

Through the Joint Task Force, the Defence Forces has also supported the rollout of the vac-

cination programme through:

- Marshalling, administration, logistical and security supports at a number of vaccination sites

- Secure storage supports

- Transportation of vaccinators in adverse weather conditions

- Transportation of vaccines by air at the request of the National Ambulance Service.

Mandatory Quarantine Scheme (MQS)

The Department of Health was the competent authority and had overall responsibility for implementation and operation of the system of MQS in accordance with the Health (Amendment) Act 2021 and associated regulations.

It had been agreed that the Defence Forces, acting in an Aid to Civil Authority role, would provide 24/7 assistance and support to the new mandatory quarantine requirements for passengers arriving from 'designated states' in accordance with the Health (Amended) Act 2021 through fulfilling the role of the State Liaison Officer. This role provided for the day to day oversight and quality assurance of the Mandatory Quarantine System. The Defence Forces role was confined to designated airports, ferry ports and at mandatory quarantine facilities.

A Service Level Agreement was put in place between the Department of Health and the Department of Defence for the provision of the Defence Forces support to the Covid 19 MQS.

Under this SLA, the roles fulfilled by the Defence Forces under the State Liaison Official function were:

- Overarching State Liaison Official (SLO) role. The DF provided a senior officer to hold the appointment of the SLO who was the official representative of the State for the MHQS. A designated officer was also appointed to the role of Deputy SLO.

- Assistant State Liaison Official (ASLO) role at Dublin Airport.

- Assistant State Liaison Official (ASLO) role at Cork and Shannon Airports.

- Terminal Liaison Official (TLO) role at Dublin Airport. The TLO role was unique to Dublin airport as there are two terminals.

- Assistant State Liaison Official (ASLO) role at Dublin, and Cork Sea Ports.

- Assistant State Liaison Official (ASLO) role at Mandatory Quarantine Facilities (MQF).

The Defence Forces will continue to consider all requests from the HSE in assisting with the national response to Covid 19.

Defence Forces

218. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Defence the status of the work of the Commission on the Defence Forces; when he expects to receive the final report of the Commission; if he has received interim reports to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56586/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Programme for Government com-

mitted to an independent commission to undertake a comprehensive review of the Defence Forces. An independent Commission on the Defence Forces was subsequently established by Government in December 2020, with a mandate to report within 12 months. The Government also approved the terms of reference, based on the Programme for Government, and the membership of the Commission. The Commission's overall approach is guided and informed by both the White Paper on Defence 2015 and the White Paper Update 2019. The work of the Commission will inform the future development of the Defence Forces and encompasses the following matters;

- Structure and size of the Defence Forces encompassing consideration of appropriate capabilities, structures and staffing.

- Leveraging the capabilities of the Reserve Defence Force in their supports to the Permanent Defence Force and make service in the RDF more attractive.

- Governance and high level command and control structures in the Defence Forces.

- The evolution of remuneration systems and structures in the Defence Forces.

- A strategic perspective on HR policies and associated strategies, recruitment, retention and career progression.

As part of a broad consultation process, the Commission invited submissions from individuals and organisations on matters related to its terms of reference. The Commission received nearly 500 submissions, all of which have been published on their website, together with an initial report on the public consultation.

The Commission has been established as an independent body and, while it is a matter entirely for the Commission, I understand that the Commission has met with a broad stakeholder group including the Defence Forces Representative Associations, commissioned and enlisted members of the Defence Forces, senior officials and personnel from my Department and the Defence Forces as well as other groups. Site visits to military locations by members of the Commission have taken place at a number of barracks across the country.

The Chairman of the Commission Mr. Aidan O'Driscoll also met with members of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence in April to discuss the on-going work of the Commission. The Commission also held two webinars, one in conjunction with the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) and one in conjunction with the Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA).

The establishment of an independent Commission on the Defence Forces underpins the Government's commitment to ensuring that the Defence Forces are fit for purpose, both in terms of meeting immediate requirements and also in terms of seeking to develop a longer term vision beyond 2030.

The Commission is mandated to submit its report by the end of the year and I look forward to receiving it. The Commission has not submitted any interim reports.

Defence Forces

219. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Defence the status of the implementation of the report by the independent review group on Jadotville; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56587/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The siege of Jadotville was a prominent event that occurred during Ireland's peacekeeping mission in the Congo in September 1961 where "A" Company, 35th Infantry Battalion, came under attack. From the 13th to the 17th September the men of "A" Company endured almost continuous attack. At the end of the Siege, the men were taken into captivity until finally released on the 25th October 1961.

The issue of awarding of Military Medals for Gallantry (MMG) and Distinguished Service Medals (DSMs) to a number of personnel who served in Jadotville in September 1961 has been considered on a number of occasions over the years and a range of actions have taken place to give due recognition to the courage and bravery of all the members of "A" Company, 35th Infantry Battalion who were stationed in Jadotville in 1961.

Notwithstanding the actions that have been taken to date to recognise and honour the valiant actions and bravery of all of the men stationed at Jadotville sixty years ago, an Independent Review Group (IRG) was established to examine and report on matters relating to recommendations for military medals relating to events at Jadotville. The IRG completed its research in July and has submitted its report to the Chief of Staff, as the convening authority. The Chief of Staff has submitted the report to my Office along with his advice. The work of the Independent Review Group has now concluded.

The IRG made a number of recommendations in their report including a recommendation that the 60th anniversary of Jadotville be commemorated. Other recommendations relate to the awarding of medals, veterans affairs and honouring the role of families and the support they provided to veterans. All recommendations have been considered at a high level.

The deeply unsettling aftermath of Jadotville is detailed in the report as is the lack of personal welfare supports afforded to the men following events at Jadotville, their period in captivity and upon their return home. I have apologised to veterans and to their families on behalf of the State and the Government to the men of 'A' Company, 35th Infantry Battalion and to their families for the lack of necessary supports or deserved recognition of their valiant service on their return from the Congo and for the many issues that arose as a result, some of which had tragic consequences. I have also acknowledged that the lack of supports in place at that time is extremely regrettable. There have been great steps in the intervening years to support Defence Forces personnel, their families and veterans through the work of the Defence Forces personnel support services.

As a matter relating to the IRG recommendations is currently before the courts, it would not be appropriate for me to provide any further information in relation to the various recommendations made by the IRG at this time.

Defence Forces

220. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Defence the reason the Air Corps Pilates PC9 aircraft is sent to Switzerland for inspections; if it relates to poor staffing levels in Casement Aerodrome; the cost of such inspections; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56652/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am advised by the military authorities that the Air Corps operate a maintenance plan which endeavors to ensure that the maximum number of operational flying hours is available from the current aircraft fleet when most needed. The maintenance of the Air Corps fleet falls into three broad categories: scheduled, unscheduled and routine/daily. The use of performance based maintenance contracts with original equipment

manufacturers assists the Air Corps in keeping downtime of aircraft to the minimum and this is in line with international best practice.

It is currently the case that various aspects of aircraft maintenance are out-sourced by the Air Corps because the cost of in-house provision of such niche expertise and the specialist equipment required to certify airframes would be prohibitively expensive and not cost effective in the context of the number of airframes operated by the Air Corps.In relation to the Pilatus PC-9M aircraft fleet of 8 aircraft, I am advised by the military authorities that the aircraft are routinely sent to the original equipment manufacturer Pilatus, in Switzerland, in order to complete certain maintenance inputs. These are most commonly annual inspections concurrent with 300 flight hour interval checks. Approximately 50% to 60% of the PC-9M fleet of 8 aircraft are sent to Pilatus manufacturing facilities on an annual basis for this purpose.

Since the introduction of the aircraft type into service, the Air Corps has had a performance based contract with Pilatus for the logistical and technical support of its PC-9M fleet. Pilatus are therefore in a position to provide the fastest turnaround times for these inspections and have all the required expertise at hand. The cost of the maintenance varies between €50k and €100k per maintenance visit, depending on the work scope and defects uncovered during the aircraft inspections.

I am satisfied that the Defence Forces have the necessary modern and effective range of equipment available to them to ensure that they can fulfil the roles assigned by Government.

Defence Forces

221. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Defence the reason the Air Corps AgustaWestland AW139 aircraft is sent to Belgium for inspections; if it relates to poor staffing levels in Casement Aerodrome; the cost of such inspections; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56653/21]

223. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Defence the amount paid to a company (details supplied) in each of the past two years to date in 2021; if these payments relate to aircraft maintenance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56655/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 221 and 223 together.

I am advised by the military authorities that the Air Corps operate a maintenance plan which endeavors to ensure that the maximum number of operational flying hours is available from the current aircraft fleet when most needed. The maintenance of the Air Corps fleet falls into three broad categories: scheduled, unscheduled and routine/daily. The use of performance based maintenance contracts with original equipment manufacturers assists the Air Corps in keeping downtime of aircraft to the minimum and this is in line with international best practice.

It is currently the case that various aspects of aircraft maintenance are out-sourced by the Air Corps because the cost of in-house provision of such niche expertise and the specialist equipment required to certify airframes would be prohibitively expensive and not cost effective in the context of the number of airframes operated by the Air Corps.In relation to the AW139 helicopter fleet of 6 aircraft I am advised that the aircraft are routinely dispatched to the original equipment manufacturer Leonardo Aircraft, in Belgium, under a logistics supply agreement to support the AW139 fleet in order to complete certain larger inspections and maintenance inputs. Approximately 60% of the fleet undergo these larger inspections on an annual basis and this involves carrying out 48 month calendar inspections and 300 and/or 600 flight hour interval

checks on each aircraft.

I am further advised that Leonardo Aircraft are in a position to provide the fastest turnaround times for these inspections and have all the required expertise at hand to ensure airworthiness certification of the aircraft. The cost of the maintenance varies between €100k and €200k per aircraft maintenance visit and the amount varies depending on the scope of works uncovered during the inspections. The payments made to Leonardo Belgium for maintenance and larger inspections on the fleet of 6 helicopter AW139 airframes during the period 1 Jan 2020 to date amounts to €1,555,376 inclusive of VAT.

All other maintenance works up to 1 year or 300 hour inspections on the aircraft are carried out by Air Corps aircraft technicians.

I am satisfied that the Defence Forces have the necessary modern and effective range of equipment available to them to ensure that they can fulfil the roles assigned to them by Government.

Defence Forces

222. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Defence the reason the Aer Corps Casa CN 235 aircraft is sent to Spain for inspections; if it relates to poor staffing levels in Casement Aerodrome; the cost of such inspections; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56654/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): My priority as Minister for Defence is to ensure that the operational capability of the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service is maintained and developed. This is to enable the Defence Forces to carry out the roles assigned by Government, as set out in the White Paper on Defence.

I am advised by the military authorities that the Air Corps operate a maintenance plan which endeavors to ensure that the maximum number of operational flying hours is available from the current aircraft fleet when most needed. The maintenance of the Air Corps fleet falls into three broad categories: scheduled, unscheduled and routine/daily. The use of performance based maintenance contracts with original equipment manufacturers assists the Air Corps in keeping downtime of aircraft to the minimum and this is in line with international best practice.

It is currently the case that various aspects of aircraft maintenance are out-sourced by the Air Corps because the cost of in-house provision of such niche expertise and the specialist equipment required to certify airframes would be prohibitively expensive and not cost effective in the context of the number of airframes operated by the Air Corps.In relation to the CASA CN 235 aircraft, I am advised by the military authorities that the two aircraft are routinely dispatched to the original equipment manufacturer Airbus under a maintenance contractual arrangement which is in place. The maintenance is at 2,400 flight hour interval checks, commonly referred to as ‘C’ checks which usually occur at intervals of 2.5 to 3 years and take place at the Airbus manufacturing facility in Spain. This has been the practice since the aircraft were introduced into operational service in 1994 and is not linked to technical staffing levels. As the fleet size is 2 aircraft it would be inefficient to provide resources to conduct this specific type of maintenance in Casement Aerodrome given the relevant infrequent interval. All other flight hour and calendar interval maintenance inputs are conducted at Casement Aerodrome by Air Corps technical personnel. Given the age of these aircraft, the cost of these maintenance inspections is around €1M per maintenance visit, but largely depends on the work scope undertaken during inspection.

I am satisfied that the Defence Forces have the necessary modern and effective range of equipment available so that they can fulfil the roles assigned to them by Government.

Question No. 223 answered with Question No. 221.

Civil Defence

224. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Defence the steps he will take to reintroduce the service that was recently stopped in which members of the Civil Defence provide transport to persons who need to attend hospital appointments; the reason the service was stopped; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56665/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Department of Defence is responsible for the development of Civil Defence at national level. In this context my Department provides policy direction, centralised training through the Civil Defence College, administrative support, guidance and centralised procurement of certain items of uniform and equipment in support of local authority Civil Defence efforts.

The local authorities have operational responsibility for Civil Defence. There is a Civil Defence Unit in each local authority area. Civil Defence services are delivered through the Civil Defence Officer (CDO) of the relevant Local Authority for that area and the CDO is a full time employee of the local authority.

The decision of a Civil Defence Unit to provide or to discontinue a particular service is ultimately a matter for each local authority. The Minister for Defence has no role in the day to day management of local Civil Defence Units.

Defence Forces

225. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Defence if he plans to amend administrative instruction A10 in relation to the use of the national flag at funerals of deceased retired members of the Defence Forces to ensure that in all cases in which a deceased member had 20 years' service with a satisfactory record the family of the deceased would be presented with the national flag at the graveside or at the crematorium as a mark of gratitude for their long service to the State; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56737/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The military authorities have advised that the National Flag which drapes the coffin of personnel who die in service is presented to the next-of-kin at the time and place of burial or cremation. At present it is not custom for the National Flag to be presented to the next-of-kin of former Defence Forces personnel.

Administration Instruction A10 sets out that in certain circumstances, where the next-of-kin of ex-service personnel request to be presented with the National Flag draping the coffin, the General Officer Commanding the Brigade, the Defence Forces Training Centre, the Air Corps or the Flag Officer Commanding the Naval Service may accede to such a request.

At present there are no plans to change the procedures currently in place.

Defence Forces

226. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which the strength of the Defence Forces has fluctuated in each of the past five years to date; if it is planned to recruit to augment the numbers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56793/21]

228. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the number of outstanding positions to be filled within the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56795/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 226 and 228 together.

The table below details the strength of the Permanent Defence Force (PDF) for each of the past five years:-

Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Strength WTE	9,126	9,173	8,957	8,659	8,572

I am advised by the military authorities that the strength of the PDF, as at 31st October 2021, is 8,572 personnel.

I have previously acknowledged the current staffing issues within the Defence Forces and am very much aware that there continues to be a shortfall, currently of 928 personnel, between the current strength figures and those of the establishment.

A range of actions have been taken to address recruitment and retention issues. There is continuing recruitment, which has resulted in a total of 577 personnel being inducted as at 15th November. The scope of direct entry competitions was expanded in 2021, from 10 competitions, to include a new Air Corps Aircraft Technician competition. Additionally, direct entry terms and conditions continue to be revised to improve intakes. The re-entry campaign for former members of the PDF continues.

Concurrent retention initiatives such as a commitment scheme in the Air Corps (for pilots) and the Naval Service have been undertaken which complement the above recruitment measures in countering current staffing challenges. Furthermore, 15 projects were undertaken to facilitate the implementation of the PSPC Report on Recruitment and Retention. Most of these projects have been completed with others being considered in the context of wider public sector pay arrangements.

Additionally, the Commission on the Defence Forces is due to submit their report by the end of the year and I look forward to receiving the report in due course. The recommendations will then be fully considered and will inform future decisions regarding the Defence Forces.

My focus remains on retaining/restoring all branches of the Defence Forces at their full capacity, but there is no quick fix to the current challenges. In that context, I would reiterate that there has been significant work undertaken to date, and such work continues, but it will take time to see the full effect of the measures introduced.

Defence Forces

227. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which his Department continues to engage with representative bodies in the Defence Forces with a view to achieving an equitable resolution to outstanding matters; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56794/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Defence (Amendment) Act 1990 and Defence Force Regulations S6 provided for the establishment of representative associations for members of the Permanent Defence Force. The associations that have since been established are RACO (for commissioned officers) and PDFORRA (for enlisted personnel).

The scheme of Conciliation and Arbitration (C&A) for members of the Permanent Defence Force provides a formal mechanism for the determination of claims and proposals from the Permanent Defence Force Representative Associations, relating to remuneration and conditions of service.

Officials from my Department continue to work with the Representative Associations in a positive and collaborative process within the C&A Scheme to resolve issues. There is also ongoing engagement on a regular basis between the Official side (comprising officials from the Department of Defence, military management, the Department of Expenditure & Public Reform) and the Representative side on a range of items.

In tandem with the above, since my appointment as Minister for Defence in 2020, I have met with the Representative Association for Commissioned Officers (RACO) on four occasions: 17 July 2020, 20 October 2020, 17 December 2020 and 13 October 2021. I have met with the Permanent Defence Force Other Ranks Representative Association (PDFORRA) on five occasions: 17 July 2020, 20 October 2020, 17 December 2020, 24 May 2021 and most recently on 13 October 2021.

I look forward to further continued constructive engagement with the Defence Forces Representative Associations and I can assure the Deputy that there will be continued engagement with the Representative Associations on all matters that fall within the scope of representation.

Question No. 228 answered with Question No. 226.

Air Corps

229. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which the Air Corps continues to receive training on par with other forces throughout the European Union with particular reference to the need to ensure the ability to work together with other forces in the event of an emergency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56796/21]

230. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which members of the Air Corps continue to receive training on an ongoing basis with particular reference to the need to familiarise themselves with modern aviation technology; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56797/21]

231. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which the Army including the Army Reserve continue to participate in modern training exercises in order to ensure the ability of the force to operate with other forces in the context of United Nations deployments and the need to maintain an ability to work alongside colleagues from the United Nations or the European Union ; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56798/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 229, 230 and 231 together.

The primary function of training in the Defence Forces is to develop and maintain the capabilities necessary to enable them to fulfil the roles laid down by Government. The Defence Forces conduct training under four broad categories, namely; Leadership, Skills, Career, and

Collective. Leadership Training is the medium through which the Defence Forces ensure that personnel are prepared for exercising command authority across the full range of military functions both at home and overseas in international operations. Skills Training ensures that Defence Forces personnel have the requisite individual, specialist, and crew skills. Career Training, and education, provides the organisation with the necessary pool of leaders and commanders at all levels. Collective Training allows military personnel to use their individual, crew, specialist and career training together, to develop integrated and coherent combat forces.

The scheduling of training in the Defence Forces, including the Reserve, is underpinned by an analysis of training required to meet operational output and capability development requirements.

The Defence Forces seek to constantly benchmark training across all three arms of the organisation against best military and academic practice. Military best practice is ensured by implementing a policy of standardisation that is in line with EU and NATO/Partnership for Peace partners. Academic best practice is ensured by benchmarking courses through accreditation under the National Framework of Qualifications which is validated by Quality and Qualifications Ireland. The Defence Forces deliver military programmes and modules meeting national and international standards and engage with external educational institutions in order to facilitate organisational learning. This engagement with national and international educational institutions, military and civilian, aims to ensure that the Defence Forces retain currency with regards to best international practice and employ all relevant modern training methods.

I remain committed to ensuring that all personnel of the Defence Forces continue to be trained to appropriate standards.

Question No. 230 answered with Question No. 229.

Question No. 231 answered with Question No. 229.

Naval Service

232. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which vessels in the Naval Service have been upgraded in line with best international requirements thereby facilitating their ability to engage in surveillance or rescue operations around Ireland's coast; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56799/21]

238. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent of audits carried out to ascertain the extent to which all equipment, navigation and otherwise used by the Naval Service whether on a regular or occasional basis is up to specific standards of an international level; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56805/21]

241. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which all seagoing vessels whether in permanent or occasional use meet international standards in respect of reliability or action worthiness; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56808/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 232, 238 and 241 together.

My priority as Minister for Defence is to ensure that the operational capability of the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service, is maintained and developed to enable the Defence Forces to carry out their roles as assigned by Government, including overseas deployments.

The Naval Service is the State's principal sea-going agency and is tasked with a variety of defence and other roles. The main day-to-day role of the Naval Service is to provide a fishery protection service in accordance with the State's obligations as a member of the European Union. There are nine ships in the fleet, with LÉ Eithne and LÉ Orla currently in operational reserve. The Naval Service is tasked with patrolling from the shoreline to the outer limits of the Exclusive Economic Zone. Patrols are carried out on a regular and frequent basis. I am advised by the military authorities that the fleet is managed and maintained so as to ensure maximum availability to meet operational requirements, including taskings on behalf of other State agencies.

Naval Service vessels are required to complete drydock maintenance, survey and inspection, twice during each ship five (5) year cycle. An intermediate drydock is carried out between two and a half (2.5) and three (3) years on each ship. A full drydock maintenance programme is carried out at five (5) years. Naval Service ships which are beyond their originally projected thirty (30) year asset life, are drydocked for inspection every year, in order to manage ageing hull risk.

Notwithstanding the capital maintenance programme for drydocks detailed above, Naval Service ships are required to undertake planned routine and non-routine maintenance on plant and machinery every day, 365 days a year, regardless of whether the vessel is on patrol, or alongside the Naval Base off Sailing Order.

The White Paper on Defence sets out an ambitious programme of capital investment in the Naval Service, including the mid-life refit and upgrade of the P50 class of vessels. This programme of works has been completed on LÉ Róisín and that ship has returned to operations, while works have commenced on LÉ Niamh.

The Defence Equipment Development Plan EDP provides a comprehensive list of planned equipment projects which will be progressed over five years. This plan builds on the intentions set out in the White Paper in relation to equipment acquisition, modernisation and upgrade and has been developed to ensure that our Defence Forces have the major equipment platforms, ancillary equipment and force protection equipment to carry out their important roles both at home and overseas.

The replacement of the flagship LÉ Eithne with a multi-role vessel, MRV, is an important element of the EDP and is provided for in the Government's National Development Plan as a major capital project. It is the intention that this new vessel will provide a flexible and adaptive capability for a wide range of maritime tasks.

Following a public tender competition, Marine Advisors have been appointed to support the procurement of the MRV. This work is now underway and will inform a public tender competition in due course.

Projects for other vessel replacements are being considered over the lifetime of the White Paper on Defence in the context of overall capability development and funding along with the overall EDP process.

I am satisfied that the Defence Forces have a modern and effective range of equipment in order to fulfil the roles assigned to them by Government.

Defence Forces

233. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which he

remains satisfied that all equipment used by the Army, Naval Service and Air Corps is in keeping with the best available in order to ensure their safety when operating on or offshore; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56800/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): My priority as Minister for Defence is to ensure that the operational capability of the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service, is maintained and developed to enable the Defence Forces to carry out their roles as assigned by Government, including overseas deployments.

The acquisition of new equipment for the Defence Forces remains a clear focus for me. Future equipment priorities for the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service are considered in the context of the White Paper on Defence as part of the capability development and equipment priorities planning process. The principal aim over the period of the White Paper is to replace and upgrade, as required, capabilities in order to retain a flexible response for a wide range of operational requirements, including response to security risks and other emergencies, both at home and overseas.

The Equipment Development Plan (EDP) published in June 2020, completed through extensive joint civil-military work, provides a comprehensive list of planned equipment projects which will be progressed over a five year period. This plan builds on the intentions set out in the White Paper in relation to equipment acquisition, modernisation and upgrades and has been developed to ensure that the Defence Forces have the major equipment platforms, ancillary equipment and force protection equipment to carry out their important roles both at home and overseas.

I am committed to update and upgrade the Defence Forces equipment and capability, having regard to the financial envelope available. The Department of Defence has received a capital allocation under the National Development Plan of €566m over the 2022-2025 timeframe. Within that capital allocation the Defence annual capital budget for 2022 is €141m. This will enable continued investment in defence equipment, including major platforms, and barracks infrastructure.

The level of capital funding available will allow the Defence Organisation to undertake a programme of sustained equipment replacement across the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service as identified and prioritised in the Defence White Paper and builds on the significant investment programme over recent years.

I am satisfied that the Defence Forces have the necessary modern and effective range of equipment available to them which is in line with best international standards in order to ensure their safety as they fulfil all roles assigned to them by Government.

Air Corps

234. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which he remains satisfied that all aircraft available to the Air Corps are fully equipped with the most up to date navigational equipment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56801/21]

239. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent of audits carried out to ascertain the extent to which all equipment, navigation and otherwise used by the Air Corps whether on a regular or occasional basis is up to specific standards of an international level; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56806/21]

242. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which all

equipment used by the Air Corps whether in permanent or occasional use meets international standards in respect of reliability and have valid certification of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56809/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 234, 239 and 242 together.

My priority as Minister for Defence is to ensure that the operational capability of the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service, is maintained and developed to enable the Defence Forces to carry out their roles as assigned by Government, including overseas deployments.

The acquisition of new equipment for the Defence Forces remains a clear focus for me. Future equipment priorities for the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service are considered in the context of the White Paper on Defence as part of the capability development and equipment priorities planning process. The principal aim over the period of the White Paper is to replace and upgrade, as required, capabilities in order to retain a flexible response for a wide range of operational requirements, including response to security risks and other emergencies, both at home and overseas.

The Equipment Development Plan (EDP) published in June 2020, completed through extensive joint civil-military work, provides a comprehensive list of planned equipment projects which will be progressed over a five year period. This plan builds on the intentions set out in the White Paper in relation to equipment acquisition, modernisation and upgrades and has been developed to ensure that the Defence Forces have the major equipment platforms, ancillary equipment and force protection equipment to carry out their important roles both at home and overseas.

I am committed to update and upgrade the Defence Forces equipment and capability, having regard to the financial envelope available. The Department of Defence has received a capital allocation under the National Development Plan of €566m over the 2022-2025 timeframe. Within that capital allocation the Defence annual capital budget for 2022 is €141m. This will enable continued investment in defence equipment, including major platforms, and barracks infrastructure.

The level of capital funding available will allow the Defence Organisation to undertake a programme of sustained equipment replacement across the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service as identified and prioritised in the Defence White Paper and builds on the significant investment programme over recent years. In relation to air-based capability, my immediate priorities have been the acquisition of three Pilatus PC-12 aircraft in the Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) role and to acquire two Airbus C295 maritime patrol aircraft. An additional PC-12 was also acquired in response to the Covid 19 situation. A contract for the supply of two C295 Maritime Patrol Aircraft was signed with Airbus Defence and Space in December 2019, with delivery of the aircraft expected in 2023. Some €276 million, including VAT, has been committed to the acquisition of all of these enhanced air capabilities.

The Air Corps operate a wide variety of aircraft and equipment, which are selected on the basis of detailed in-depth and rigorous selection and evaluation process. Part of the acquisitions process looks at the operational reliability and performance of such equipment to meet the required performance. Aircraft possess relevant military or civilian type certification and as such, any equipment carried is in accordance with manufacturer's requirements and certain required standards.

I am advised by the Military Authorities that the General Officer Commanding Air Corps publishes an annual audit plan which pertains to a number of different strands from flight safety,

maintenance quality assurance and flight operations. Air Corps aircraft routinely operate in civilian airspace both, domestically and internationally and at all times conform to the prevailing international standards as it may pertain to aircraft equipment and navigation systems. Equipment and systems are checked and continuously approved by both the Air Corps technical staff and by commercial technical staff if aircraft are undergoing maintenance with the original equipment manufacturer. Similarly, Air Corps crews are trained in synthetic training devices (simulators) on a regular basis and this includes periodic checks by external third party approved training organisations to ensure ongoing competence and that international standards with respect to the operation of such equipment and systems are met.

All Air Corps aircraft are equipped with the most up to date navigational equipment as appropriate. The CASA C235 aircraft have received midlife upgrades in relation to certain safety and navigation equipment that was not available at the time of manufacture in the early 1990s which included the installation of traffic awareness and collision avoidance systems, enhanced ground proximity warning systems and upgraded Flight Navigation System. These aircraft will be replaced by the new Airbus C295 aircraft which are scheduled for delivery in 2023. These new aircraft, when delivered, will be equipped with a contemporary and comprehensive navigational system.

I am satisfied that the Defence Forces have the necessary modern and effective range of equipment available to them in order to ensure that they can fulfil the roles assigned to them by Government.

Naval Service

235. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the number of training courses available throughout out the year to members of the Naval Service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56802/21]

236. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the number of training courses available throughout out the year to members of the Air Corps; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56803/21]

237. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the number of training courses available throughout out the year to members of the Army; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56804/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 235, 236 and 237 together.

I am advised that the number of training courses currently available throughout the year to members of each service within the Defence Forces is as follows:

Defence Forces	Number
Army	1,274
Naval Service	331
Air Corps	209

The training of Defence Forces personnel is underpinned by an analysis of training required to meet operational output and capability development requirements. The Defence Forces seek to constantly benchmark training across all three arms of the organisation against best military and academic practice. I remain committed to ensuring that all personnel continue to be trained to appropriate standards.

Question No. 236 answered with Question No. 235.

Question No. 237 answered with Question No. 235.

Question No. 238 answered with Question No. 232.

Question No. 239 answered with Question No. 234.

Defence Forces

240. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent of audits done to ascertain the extent to which all equipment, navigation and otherwise used by the Army whether on a regular or occasional basis is up to specific standards of an international level; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56807/21]

243. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which he remains satisfied that the standard and quality of equipment used by the Army and available for regular use is kept at the highest standard in order to ensure reliability and safety during operation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56810/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 240 and 243 together.

My priority as Minister for Defence is to ensure that the operational capability of the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service, is maintained and developed to enable the Defence Forces to carry out their roles as assigned by Government, including overseas deployments.

The Equipment Development Plan (EDP) published in June 2020 provides a comprehensive list of planned equipment projects, which will be progressed over five years. This plan builds on the intentions set out in the White Paper in relation to equipment acquisition, modernisation and upgrade and has been developed to ensure that our Defence Forces have the major equipment platforms, ancillary equipment and force protection equipment to carry out their important roles both at home and overseas. The equipment planning process recognises the need to maintain and upgrade military capabilities having regard to emerging operational requirements and changes in technology, including communications equipment and technology and this is an ongoing process. When procuring all Defence Forces equipment, the process involves appropriately qualified Defence Forces personnel who ensure the relevant national and international standards for military equipment are taken into account and met, where applicable.

I am advised by the military authorities that General Routine Order (GRO) 05/2015 'Health and Safety Management in the Defence Forces' sets out the Defence Forces health and safety risk management system, which is designed to control risk and continually improve health and safety risk performance through proactive and effective health and safety risk management. The Defence Forces Policy on Work Equipment is one such policy, outlined in part 6 of the GRO. This policy itself describes the Defence Forces methodology for the assessment of risk arising from work equipment. It provides guidance for military personnel, civilian employees and other relevant persons on the risk assessment process and control measures to be implemented to reduce the risk of injury from work equipment to a level that is as low as is reasonably practicable. Periodic equipment inspections are an intrinsic element of routine military unit activities; this includes user level, health and safety type checks and Ordnance technical type inspections to ensure that equipment is maintained to an operational state at all times.

I am advised by the Military Authorities that the Defence Forces have the necessary policies

and procedures in place in line with best international practice in order to ensure the highest standards of health and safety in respect of the use of equipment to fulfil all roles assigned to them by Government, and that such policies and procedures are kept under review.

Question No. 241 answered with Question No. 232.

Question No. 242 answered with Question No. 234.

Question No. 243 answered with Question No. 240.

Defence Forces

244. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the number of women currently serving in the Army, Naval Service and Air Corps; the extent to which this number has varied over the past ten years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56811/21]

245. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the number of women currently holding senior positions in the Army, Naval Service and Air Corps; the number of promotional posts likely to arise in the near future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56812/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 244 and 245 together.

I am advised by the military authorities that, as at 31st October 2021, the whole time equivalent strength of female personnel in the Permanent Defence Force was 601 comprised of 487 Army personnel, 40 Air Corps personnel and 74 Naval Service personnel.

The strength of female personnel in the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service for each of the years 2011-2020 is provided in Table 1 (attached) while the current strength is provided, in the requested breakdown, in Table 2 (attached).

In line with current policies and commitments a number of initiatives have been implemented to increase the level of female participation in the Permanent Defence Force. These include:

- Special consideration is paid to women as a target group for recruitment within the general recruitment framework.

- A Gender Equality and Diversity Officer has been appointed to promote gender equality policies and training within the Defence Forces. The Defence Forces are committed to gender equality and employ a gender perspective in the planning and execution of operations both at home and overseas and in all policies and regulations. Gender Advisors are available to all Brigades and Services and trained Gender Focal Points are deployed with all overseas units and ships in order to promote a gender perspective in operations.

- A Defence Forces Women's Network was established with the aim of increasing the participation of female personnel at all levels of the organisation.

Vacancies, where current strength is less than the establishment strength, are filled on an ongoing, gender neutral basis. They are filled in line with promotional arrangements and, in certain cases, direct entry competitions and re-entry of ex PDF personnel. Vacancies at Private Rank are filled by general service recruitment and direct entry competition. Table 3 shows all vacancies (negative figures in Column D) as at 31st October 2021.

The Government remains committed to a policy of equal opportunity for men and women throughout the Defence Forces and to the full participation by women in all aspects of Defence Forces activities.

Female Personnel Table

Permanent Defence Forces Table

Establishment by Rank Table

Question No. 245 answered with Question No. 244.

Defence Forces

246. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Defence the policy position adopted by his Department with respect to the repurposing of decommissioned Army barracks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56771/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): In line with Government Policy, any property that is identified as being surplus to military requirements is disposed of. In disposing of such property, the Department of Defence is required to determine if the Land Development Agency, Government Departments or Local Authorities are interested in acquiring same.

Should no such interest be declared, the Department of Defence proceeds with disposal of the property by way of unrestricted competition via public auction for the best obtainable consideration having regard to the market value of the property.

State Examinations

247. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education if the option of accredited grades will be offered to those due to sit the leaving certificate in 2022; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56584/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The State Examinations Commission has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

In view of this I have forwarded your query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to you.

School Transport

248. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Education the status of a special transport grant application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56600/21]

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.

The purpose of the School Transport Scheme for Children with Special Educational Needs is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children with special educational needs arising from a diagnosed disability.

Under the terms of the 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.

In certain cases, the Department also provides funding to schools for the employment of escorts to accompany children whose care and safety needs require this level of support while they travel to and from school.

The pupil referred to by the Deputy is eligible under the terms of the School Transport Scheme for Children with Special Educational Needs and has been accommodated on a service since the 2018/19 school year. This service is still in operation for the current year and there is also an escort on board. As there is a reasonable level of service in place, the Special Transport Grant would not be offered to the family. However, if the family wish to provide further information to outline reasons why this pupil cannot avail of the service, they may submit same to School Transport Section for consideration.

Special Educational Needs

249. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Education if supports can be provided to a student (details supplied) with dyslexia; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56601/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): The Department provides for a range of placement options and supports for schools, which have enrolled pupils with special educational needs, including pupils with Specific Learning Disability (SLD); of which Dyslexia is one such SLD, in order to ensure that wherever a child is enrolled, s/he will have access to an appropriate education.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE), which is a separate statutory agency, through its network of local Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs), is responsible for the provision of special educational needs supports to schools. The NCSE operates within the Department's criteria in allocating such support

All Primary schools have been allocated additional teaching resources to cater for children with special educational needs, including pupils with dyslexia. In September 2017 the Department introduced a new model to support pupils with special educational needs in our schools. It is a matter for schools to monitor and utilise their allocation of additional teaching support to best support the needs of identified pupils, in accordance with the Department's guidance. The teaching time afforded to each individual pupil is decided and managed by schools, taking into account each child's individual learning needs.

Guidelines for schools on the organisation, deployment and use of their special education teachers have been published on the Department's website, at www.education.ie/en/The-Ed-

ucation-System/Special-Education/Guidelines-for-Primary-Schools-Supporting-Pupils-with-Special-Educational-Needs-in-Mainstream-Schools.pdf Schools are supported in this regard by the National Educational Psychological Services.

Educational Psychologists from the Department's National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) work with schools using a problem solving model to help schools identify need and interventions to support those needs. Under the new model, NEPS encourages schools to use a continuum based assessment and intervention process whereby each school takes responsibility for initial assessment, educational planning and remedial intervention for pupils with learning, emotional or behavioural difficulties. Teachers may consult their NEPS psychologist should they wish to for advice.

NEPS understands dyslexia in the context the severity and persistence of an individual's needs over time and their response to intervention. This approach aligns with the new Special Educational model in schools which focuses on the identification of need and the matching of specific interventions to that need. Specific interventions are therefore tailored, by the school, to the individual's observed needs by the school, rather than being generic to a specific difficulty or disability.

The Department also provides for special schools and special class placements where more intensive and supportive interventions are provided. Special classes attached to mainstream primary schools also support the needs of pupils with dyslexia. Such classes have a reduced pupil/teacher ratio of 9:1 and an increased level of capitation grant.

Funding is available to schools under the assistive technology scheme for the purchase of specialised equipment such as computers and/or software to assist children with special educational needs, including children with dyslexia.

Schools apply to the NCSE, through their local Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) for such support. SENOs make recommendations to the Department where assistive technology is required, in accordance with the criteria set out in the Department's Circular 0010/2013.

The Department encourages parents and school authorities to engage locally regarding pupils' education. Should a parent be dissatisfied with the manner in which supports have been provided to support their child's education they should raise this matter directly with their school Principal or the Board of Management of the school. Parents may also contact their local SENO directly to discuss their child's present or future educational needs, using the contact details available on www.ncse.ie.

Teacher Training

250. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Education the number of primary level teachers who graduated in each of the years 2017 to 2020 and to date 2021, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56671/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): There are 5 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) providing primary Initial Teaching Education (ITE) in Ireland, four State-funded and one private provider.

Each of the State-funded providers has both concurrent (undergraduate) and consecutive (postgraduate) programmes:

- DCU Institute of Education.

- Marino Institute of Education.

- Maynooth University (Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education)

- Mary Immaculate College.

The number of students admitted to primary concurrent and consecutive programmes in State-funded HEIs is determined by the Minister, having regard to teacher supply and demand issues, and available resources. The intake has remained broadly stable, over the past number of years. Hibernia College is a privately owned institution which provides a primary consecutive (postgraduate) ITE programme.

The number of graduates per year, from 2017 - 2021 across the various institutions, is set out in the following table:

		2017	2018	2019	2020	Estimated 2021*
State Funded HEIs	Concurrent programmes	1005	975	974	971	1000
	Consecutive programmes	214	217	225	231	200
	Total	1219	1192	1199	1202	1200
Non-state Funded HEIs	Total (Consecutive programmes only)	680	632	598	683	683
	Total Graduates	1899	1824	1797	1885	1883

*Note that estimate figures only are available for 2021 at this point.

I am aware that in recent years, school management bodies, school leaders and teacher unions have reported that some schools are experiencing difficulties in recruiting teachers, particularly teachers of certain subjects at post-primary level and substitute teachers at post-primary and primary levels.

In response to these difficulties, in March 2018, the Teacher Supply Steering Group, chaired by the Secretary General of my Department, was established. The Steering Group is overseeing the implementation of the Teacher Supply Action Plan, published in November 2018, which includes a range of actions under four policy headings: data/research to support teacher supply planning; higher education; policies and arrangements impacting on teacher supply; and communications / promotion of the teaching profession.

In November 2019, my Department published a technical report "Developing a Teacher Demand and Supply Model for Ireland 2020-2036". The report was updated in May 2021 with projections of teacher demand and supply to 2038 at primary and post primary levels. Ultimately, the intention is to establish a robust data based model for the effective projection of future teacher demand and supply across the school system.

My Department is aware of the challenges currently being experienced by some primary schools in recruiting substitute teachers and has engaged with the education stakeholders on the these issues.

A range of measures are in place to provide enhanced substitute cover in the context of the current challenges. 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. A review of the supply panels has taken place and approximately 100 additional teachers are being added to existing/new areas where significant challenges have been demonstrated in sourcing substitution. Posts have been allocated to the base schools to allow arrangements for the recruitment of additional staff immediately.

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.

In addition to the expansion of the supply panels, schools have been asked to combine their allocation of principal release days into clusters so as to form a full-time fixed-term post to cover each school's principal release days

For the current school year, changes have been made to the career break scheme to permit teachers on career break to carry out unlimited substitute work. Changes have also been made to the Job Sharing Scheme to permit job sharing teachers carry out substitute work on the days they are rostered off in their own or in other schools.

The Teaching Council have undertaken a communications campaign to contact the 111,700 teachers on its register to raise awareness to the current teacher substitute challenges and to ask those teachers where possible to make themselves available for substitution in schools and to register on SubSeeker.ie so that schools are aware of their availability when seeking to fill substitute vacancies.

The Council and my Department have also engaged with higher education institutions, who have been requested to be flexible in programme delivery to enhance the availability of PME student teachers to undertake substitution work. PME students have also been advised to register with the Teaching Council and to register with Sub Seeker.

My Department will continue to engage with the education stakeholders on the issues raised about the current difficulty in accessing substitutes for teacher absences.

School Staff

251. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Education the number of primary level teachers in schools in County Meath employed on full-time contracts in each of the years 2017 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [56672/21]

252. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Education the number of primary level teachers in schools in County Meath employed on part-time or temporary contracts in each of the years 2017 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [56673/21]

253. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Education the number of primary level teachers in schools in County Westmeath employed on full-time contracts in each of the years

2017 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [56674/21]

254. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Education the number of primary level teachers in schools in County Westmeath employed on part-time or temporary contracts in each of the years 2017 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [56675/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 254, 251, 252 and 253 together.

The information requested by the Deputy is not readily available. Clarification is being sought from the Deputy on the detail required. The information will then be compiled and will be forwarded directly to the Deputy.

Environmental Schemes

255. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Education if she has had discussions with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage in relation to a proposal by a group (details supplied) which proposes that the State would as a collaborative effort co-ordinated by the two Departments and including schools from all around the country, plant a native tree in a single site in a new national park for each school-going pupil in the State; her views in relation to same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56727/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I understand that the proposal in question relates to Coillte lands and would therefore suggest that the students might direct their proposal to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine in the first instance. My Department would be happy to discuss with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine what support we might be able to offer in terms of connecting with schools, should that Department / Coillte, be in a position to progress the proposal.

We are aware of a number of initiatives aimed at encouraging schools to plant trees, such as Self Help Africa's 'One Million Trees' campaign, Crann Trees for Ireland Plant for the Planet project, the Tree Council of Ireland's Tetra Pak Tree Day, tetra-pak-tree-day.

The National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) aims to ensure that by 2030 "all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development".

Under the first Strategy 2014 – 2020, significant progress was made. We:

Integrated ESD themes and principles across curricula at all levels

Integrated ESD into Initial Teacher Education

Promoted and support programmes of ESD related CPD for Teachers

Integrated ESD into the Assessment Process

Integrated ESD into the Inspection Process

Established an ESD Portal centrally housing ESD related resources for schools

Integrated ESD into the Higher Education System Performance Framework 2018-2020

ESD has been prioritised as a key area for Research calls

During May and June 2021, myself and the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (D.FHERIS), Simon Harris T.D., held a joint public consultation to inform the development of a 2nd National Strategy on ESD to 2030.

The consultation set out the Department's intention to develop the strategy in line with UNESCO's Framework for ESD for 2030 with five key pillars: Policy Alignment, Transforming Learning Environments, Capacity Building, Youth Empowerment and Community Engagement.

The 2nd strategy will build on the foundations laid under the 1st strategy with the aim of delivering on the UNs Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 4. ESD is widely acknowledged as both a target in itself and a key enabler for the achievement of all 17 SDGs.

As part of the development of the new Strategy, and in line with the 1st pillar "Policy Alignment", the Department together with D.FHERIS are holding bi-lateral meetings with other Government Departments to explore opportunities for collaboration and alignment in the area of ESD and to develop concrete actions for the accompanying implementation plan. We will also hold bilateral meetings with key stakeholders including those representing the Youth Voice.

The Departments' aim is to publish the strategy for ESD to 2030 and accompanying implementation plan in Q1 of 2022.

Oideachas trí Ghaeilge

256. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den Aire Oideachais cén fhoireann bhreise agus cén maoiniú breise atá curtha ar fáil cheana féin don Aonad um Oideachas Gaeltachta chun beartas maidir le hoideachas trí Ghaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht a fhorbairt; cén fhoireann agus cén maoiniú breise a chuirfear ar fáil ina leith sin in 2022; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [56735/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Tá mo Roinn tiomanta do chur chun cinn an oideachais trí mheán na Gaeilge sa chóras oideachais trí forbairt a dhéanamh ar pholasaí nua don oideachas lán-Ghaeilge lasmuigh de cheantair Ghaeltachta, mar aon le cur i bhfeidhm leanúnach rathúil an Pholasaí don Oideachas Gaeltachta. Beidh forbairt an pholasaí nua don oideachas lán-Ghaeilge lasmuigh de cheantair Ghaeltachta bunaithe ar chomhoibriú idir rannóga ábhartha mo Roinne, le tacaíocht chuí ó ranna rialtais agus eagraíochtaí ábhartha eile agus trí phróiseas comhairliúcháin fairsing agus cuimsitheach le páirtithe leasmhara. Cuirfear acmhainní breise ar fáil in 2022 chun tacú le forbairt an pholasaí nua don oideachas lán-Ghaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht, lena n-áirítear maoiniú breise chun taighde náisiúnta agus idirnáisiúnta a choimisiúnú.

QUESTION:

To ask the Minister for Education what additional staff and funding has already been provided to the Gaeltacht Education Unit to develop a policy on Irish-medium education outside the Gaeltacht; what staff and additional funding will be made available in this regard in 2022; and shall make a statement thereon.

ANSWER:

My Department is committed to promoting Irish-medium education in the education system through the development of a new policy for Irish-medium education outside of Gaeltacht areas, as well as continuing to successfully implement the Policy on Gaeltacht Education. The development of the new policy on Irish-medium education outside Gaeltacht areas will be based on co-operation between relevant sections of my Department, with appropriate support from other government departments and relevant organisations and through an extensive and comprehensive consultation process with stakeholders. Additional resources will be made available in 2022 to support the development of the new policy on Irish-medium education outside the Gaeltacht, including additional funding to commission national and international research.

State Examinations

257. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Education if the State Examinations Commission plans to conduct an investigation into the reason a higher proportion of lower grades were awarded to students sitting the leaving certificate politics and society examination, particularly at ordinary level compared to other subjects such as history, geography and business; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56763/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The State Examinations Commission has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

In view of this I have forwarded your query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to you.

State Examinations

258. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Education the additional resources made available by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment for leaving certificate politics and society students and teachers following the addition of 17 key thinkers to the ordinary level syllabus in 2019; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56764/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has plans to develop additional resources to support the changes made to the Leaving Certificate Politics and Society curriculum. The time for the development of these resources, which were planned to be published in the second quarter of this year, has been impacted by the requirement to assign a number of NCCA staff to the Health Service Executive (HSE) on a temporary basis, to form part of a dedicated Public Health Team, comprised of public health officials and members with educational expertise and experience, established in each of the HSE eight regions.

I can confirm that the NCCA are currently liaising with colleagues in the Professional Development Services for Teachers (PDST) support service and the resources will be made available before the end of 2021.

State Examinations

259. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Education the State Examination Commission's plans to publish a more detailed marking scheme for the leaving certificate politics and society examination paper; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56765/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The State Examinations Commission has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

In view of this I have forwarded your query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to you.

School Funding

260. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Education when a school (details supplied) will be informed of a decision by her Department on two emergency works applications relating to electrical work and a fire alarm further to the provision by the school of all information requested to the emergency works team of her Department. [56770/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I would like to inform the Deputy that the school in question submitted an application for funding under my Departments Emergency Works Scheme which combined both of the projects mentioned above, this was approved on the 12th of October. The school can access the approval letter and appendices under the Devolved Projects tab of their Esinet portal.

Rural Schemes

261. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will engage with union representatives (details supplied) of the rural social scheme supervisors and an organisation with a view to addressing pension claims; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56605/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien): The Department is not the employer of Tús and Rural Social Scheme (RSS) supervisors or assistant supervisors, its role continues to be that of funder of the related programmes.

Matters that relate to the employment relationship between the Implementing Bodies (IBs) as employers and the Tús/RSS supervisors and assistant supervisors as employees are dealt with by the employers and staff representatives. The statutory mechanisms are in place to allow these parties seek the resolution of necessary employment-related matters between them.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Education Schemes

262. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of students in receipt of the back to education allowance in each year since 2011; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56617/21]

263. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will provide a list of the approved third-level institutions for the back to education allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56618/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 262 and 263 together.

The Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) provides income support for jobseekers and oth-

ers in receipt of certain social welfare payments who pursue courses of education at second or third level. The conditions under which the BTEA operates are designed to support customers into employment, subject to meeting certain conditions. The budget allocation for 2021 is approximately €96.5m which represents a considerable investment in supporting participants to acquire the necessary education and skills to re-enter the labour market.

An approved course of study must lead to a qualification that is recognised by the Department of Further Education, Research, Innovation and Science or awarded by the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) as laid out under the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The Department will provide the Deputy with a full list of the approved third level institutions supported under BTEA.

The table below details the number of students supported with a weekly BTEA allowance at year end from 2011, up to 31 October 2021. As part of the Government's Pathways to Work 2021-2025 strategy, there is a commitment to increase participation and funding under this demand led scheme.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Year	No. of BTEA Participants at year end
2011	24,666
2012	25,033
2013	24,175
2014	22,714
2015	18,345
2016	14,386
2017	11,336
2018	9,215
2019	7,283
2020	6,387
2021 (as of 31st October)	4,929

Question No. 263 answered with Question No. 262.

Disability Services

264. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection the target month and year she is working to for the publication of the cost of disability research; the reason the report has not yet been published; and the actions that have been taken on foot of the report since she received it. [56625/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department commissioned Indecon International Consultants to carry out research into the cost of disability in Ireland. The Programme for Government commits the Government to use this research into the cost of disability to individuals and families to properly inform the direction of future policy.

This matter is significantly wider than the income support system which is why a whole-of-Government perspective is being taken. There is not a single typical 'cost of disability', rather there is a spectrum from low additional costs to extremely high extra costs of disability, depending on the individual circumstances of the person with a disability. Additional costs of disability

go across a number of areas of expenditure including housing; equipment, aids and appliances; mobility, transport and communications; medicines; care and assistance services and additional living expenses.

The report has been received and my Department has been considering it in detail. As part of this consideration, the Department briefed and sought the views of relevant Government departments which have a role to play in the delivery of disability services and supports.

This process is now complete and I intend to submit the report to Government for consideration shortly. A decision regarding the appropriate date of publication will be made once Government has had an opportunity to consider the report fully.

The supports and services for people with a disability are continually reviewed by my Department. As part of Budget 2022, I announced a number of improvements, including specific changes to Disability Allowance and the Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS), as follows:

- €5 increase in the maximum weekly rate of Disability Allowance, with proportionate increases for people receiving a reduced rate.

- An increase in the earnings threshold above which means is fully assessed by €25 from €350 to €375 per week, for Disability Allowance (and Blind Pension), effective from June 2022.

- An increase in the general weekly means disregard entry point for Disability Allowance from €2.50 to €7.60. Increasing this to €7.60 will bring the weekly means disregard for Disability Allowance in line with Blind Pension, One Parent Family and Carer's Allowance. The effect of this measure will be to increase the weekly rate of payment by up to €5 per week for Disability Allowance recipients who have means.

- The Wage Subsidy Scheme base subsidy paid to employers who employ people with a disability will increase from €5.30 to €6.30 per hour from January 2022.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Civil Service

265. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Social Protection the way in which the pension of a civil servant who has taken additional annual leave days more than their entitlement who has since retired is affected; the process and procedures in place to retrieve the overpayment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56682/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): For retiring officers, upon receipt of a notice of retirement and the completed exit forms, the officers annual leave entitlement is calculated and verified with their line manager and the Department's HR Unit.

In cases where retired officers have taken leave in excess of their entitlement, in line with the Civil Service Annual Leave Circular 27/03 and the Overpayments Circular 07/18, the equivalent monetary amount is recouped from the individual.

In relation to cases who have already retired from service, the National Shared Services Office, the civil service office with responsibility for processing pay and pensions to civil servants, in accordance with the above circulars, will write to the individual to notify the amount of the overpayment and arrange for recoupment by direct payment or deduction from pension payments.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Employment Support Services

266. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Social Protection if there will be a provision in the request for tenders for the provision of regional employment services to ensure that full employment services will be available in the medium of the Irish including written and oral contact with the services themselves; if there will be a further requirement for all tenders to outline the way they propose delivering on such a provision; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56722/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department is now at an advanced stage in its first phase of procuring new employment services. This phase involves the procurement of regional employment services for seven counties in the Midlands and North-West across four lots. Procurement for the second phase, while will roll out services across the State, will commence shortly.

All services provided on behalf of the Department of Social protection are required to provide access to services through the Irish language in accordance with the Official Languages Act 2003 and the Department's own Irish Language Scheme (2019-2022).

This will remain the case for procured employment services in 2021 and 2022.

Tenderers for the Regional Employment Services lots, in particular, are required to demonstrate how the will add social value, specifically through improving the social and economic well-being of the specific area. This includes Gaeltacht areas, where relevant.

The expansion of employment services will see coverage for the first time in several key Gaeltacht areas including Donegal and County Galway outside of Galway City.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Child Protection

267. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the measures being taken by Tusla under section 3 of the Child Care Act 1991 to fulfil its statutory function to promote the welfare of children that are not receiving adequate care and protection; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56608/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): Section 3 of the Child Care Act 1991 places a statutory responsibility on Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, to promote the welfare of children who are not receiving adequate care and protection.

Tusla has a statutory duty to respond to reports of children who are not receiving adequate care and protection. Tusla assesses the information received and the child and family's situation, and provides appropriate social work intervention and family support services. Where necessary in the best interest of the child, children are received into the care of Tusla.

Tusla has a dedicated Quality Assurance Team which produces monthly, quarterly and annual reports in respect of Tusla's functions, including detailed reporting on child safety and protection services. The reports are published on Tusla's website and are scrutinised by my

officials. Issues of note are brought to my attention. The reports provide statistical evidence of improvements to child welfare and protection services and highlight challenges and areas where further improvement is required, such as the recruitment of additional social workers. Most recent reports indicate that 89% (5,233/5,851) of children in care nationally had an allocated social worker at the end of Q2 2021; down three percentage points from Q1 2021 (92%).

Additionally, Tusla child protection and welfare, and alternative care services are inspected against the relevant Standards and Regulations by the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA). These inspection reports are also published, and the findings used to inform the development and improvement of services within Tusla. Most inspections are generally positive, and reflect both examples of good practice and dedicated staff. However, some reports identify challenges, within individual areas, to maintaining a consistently high standard of service, including the impact of staffing shortages, and difficulties in finding appropriate placements for children and young people.

Officials from my Department meet Tusla management on a regular basis to review the level of service provision, including areas in need of improvement. The recruitment and retention of social workers is a priority for Tusla, and in that regard there is a significant amount of work being done, both by Tusla and my officials, to increase the recruitment of social workers.

Child and Family Agency

268. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of times that Tusla has applied to the District Court for child welfare order under section 13, 17 or 18 of the Child Care Act 1991 when it has found that a child or children are considered to be at immediate and serious risk; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56609/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

Child and Family Agency

269. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of times Tusla has made an application for section 17 orders, interim care orders with respect to newborn babies including in those circumstances in which a pre-birth case conference has taken place and a court has judged that the child will be at serious risk if they do not come into care; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56610/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I thank the Deputy for his question relating to the very serious and sensitive matter of interim care orders being sought for newborn babies. As the Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

Domestic Violence

270. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration

and Youth if he will address concerns that there is no emergency accommodation available in County Offaly for victims of domestic violence; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that this situation has been ongoing for the past 25 years; the steps he is taking to rectify this service deficit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56621/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The response to Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence (DSGBV) is a cross Departmental and multi-agency issue. Overall policy is coordinated by the Department of Justice. Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, has statutory responsibility for the care and protection of victims of DSGBV under the Child and Family Agency Act 2013. Capital funding for approved housing bodies, including services that provide refuge accommodation for victims of DSGBV, is provided by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

I am informed by Tusla that support for victims of DSGBV in County Offaly is available through the services of Offaly Domestic Violence Support Services (ODVSS), which is based in Tullamore and funded by Tusla. ODVSS has received an allocation of approximately €247,000 in 2021 to support their important work. This amount is inclusive of additional funding to address service pressures arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, which has allowed for this service to operate at weekends. In relation to a dedicated refuge, there is no purpose built refuge facility in County Offaly at present, but women can avail of emergency domestic violence accommodation in Counties Kildare and Westmeath, where there are two refuges supported by Tusla. I am aware, along with Tusla, of the gaps in emergency accommodation provision across the Midlands area, including County Offaly.

Tusla's 'Review of the Provision of Accommodation for Victims of Domestic Violence' assesses the current and requisite distribution of safe emergency accommodation and has examined the current level of refuge provision, evidence of demand for services and unmet need, and analysis of proximity to refuge by local communities. The Review has been completed and is undergoing the final edit for publication. It is intended to publish the Review this month. I am not yet in a position to confirm if a refuge for victims of DSGBV will be established in County Offaly. In Budget 2022, Tusla has been allocated an additional €41 million over the 2021 allocation. I have directed Tusla to use part of these additional resources to maintain supports for DSGBV services and address the recommendations arising from Tusla's Accommodation Review of refuge provision.

My Department will be guided by the recommendations of the Review. I expect that the implementation process for the Review will identify priority areas where there is greatest urgency in achieving safe accommodation for victims of DSGBV. The Review represents my commitment to prioritising and supporting victims of DSGBV. Implementation will require collaboration from a range of statutory and other bodies. My Department continues to engage with Tusla, Non-Government Organisations that play a key role in this area, and other relevant Government Departments and Agencies (particularly the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Department of Justice) to progress work in this area.

Departmental Funding

271. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if funding is available from his Department to support local authorities in hosting fireworks displays at Halloween and on New Year's Eve. [56669/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The Minister for Children; Equality; Disability; Integration and Youth does not

provide dedicated funding to support local authorities in hosting fireworks displays at Halloween and on New Year's Eve.

Domestic Violence

272. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the additional supports being put in place in each county to support victims of domestic violence on a long-term basis; if his Department will review the need for a dedicated refuge in each county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56677/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The response to Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence (DSGBV) is a cross Departmental and multi-agency issue. Overall policy is coordinated by the Department of Justice. Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, has statutory responsibility for the care and protection of victims of DSGBV under the Child and Family Agency Act 2013. Capital funding for approved housing bodies, including services that provide refuge accommodation for victims of DSGBV, is provided by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Tusla's 'Review of the Provision of Accommodation for Victims of Domestic Violence' assesses the current and requisite distribution of safe emergency accommodation and has examined the current level of refuge provision, evidence of demand for services and unmet need, and analysis of proximity to refuge by local communities. The Review has been completed and is undergoing the final edit for publication. It is intended to publish the Review this month. I am not yet in a position to confirm if funding for refuges for victims of DSGBV will be provided for the establishment of a dedicated refuge in each county.

In 2021, I allocated €30m to Tusla specifically to support DSGBV services throughout the country. This included €2m for necessary supports to service providers arising from Covid19.

In Budget 2022, Tusla has been allocated an additional €41 million over the 2021 allocation. I have directed Tusla to use part of these additional resources to maintain supports for DSGBV services and address the recommendations arising from Tusla's Accommodation Review of refuge provision.

My Department will be guided by the recommendations of the Review. I expect that the implementation process for the Review will identify priority areas where there is greatest urgency in achieving safe accommodation for victims of DSGBV. This process will also be guided by the Review in the consideration for refuge spaces over the longer term. The Review represents my commitment to prioritising and supporting victims of DSGBV. Implementation will require collaboration from a range of statutory and other bodies. My Department continues to engage with Tusla, Non-Government Organisations that play a key role in this area, and other relevant Government Departments and Agencies, particularly the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Department of Justice, to progress work in this area.

Youth Services

273. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will review the restrictions on youth group work which are currently restricted to pods of six given the vast majority of volunteer led youth work has not been able to resume or to have open access services such as youth cafés and drop ins and so on; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56698/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): Having regard to the need to support often vulnerable young people during the pandemic, the Guidance for Exchequer /DCEDIY funded Youth Work Organisations was recently updated to allow for pods of up to 15 young people of mixed vaccination status to be allowed for indoor youth service provision. The guidance provides for larger numbers where all participants are fully vaccinated and also states a preference for outdoor provision or smaller group work where these are viable options.

The Department has worked with youth services throughout the duration of the ongoing pandemic to ensure that young people, especially those who are vulnerable, continue to receive necessary supports to the greatest degree possible. In recent weeks, many services had continued to be delivered in a variety of ways, some remotely, some outdoor when weather permitted, and some, with strict regard to public health guidance, through indoor work using multiple pods, be it that until recently, each pod was made up of a maximum of six young people. Larger pods will now assist services to reach young people and support their attendance.

The Department has worked closely with key youth sector representatives to provide sector-specific guidance in line with the *Government's Resilience & Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19* and *Reframing the Challenge: Continuing our Recovery and Reconnecting* to ensure that young people continue to be supported in a manner consistent with evolving public health guidance and to address other issues arising in the sector as a result of Covid-19.

As we move beyond the pandemic, I am committed to continuing to support this important sector, which has enormous value to the many young people involved and from a broader social and economic viewpoint.

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

274. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when excavations will be carried out at the burial site of the former mother and baby home in Tuam; the reason for the delay in commencing same; if An Garda Síochána will be involved in the supervision of the excavation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56731/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The Government is committed to advancing the legislation that is required to support intervention at the site of the former mother and baby home in Tuam.

The General Scheme of a Certain Institutional Burials (Authorised Interventions) Bill was developed to provide the required legal basis for exhumation, identification and dignified reburial of the infants at the Tuam site and other locations should similar circumstances come to light. The Bill, which covers a range of complex issues, was published in December 2019. It was due to commence pre-legislative scrutiny in early 2020 but this was affected by the general election and the subsequent formation of a new Government and establishment of new Oireachtas committees.

I referred the General Scheme afresh to the Oireachtas for pre-legislative scrutiny in January 2021. The Committee published its report on the legislation in July. The report makes a number of recommendations in relation to the Bill. In light of these recommendations, and engagements I have had with families in Tuam, the Department is reviewing the legislation to take account of issues raised by the Committee, survivors, and family members. I hope to publish the Bill

and bring it through the Houses of the Oireachtas as quickly as possible to allow excavation of the site in 2022.

An Garda Síochána does not have a supervisory role concerning the excavation of a site in the context of the Bill; however, it is outlined that, where the remains show evidence of violent or unnatural death, the Director overseeing the intervention at the site will have to immediately inform them, as well as the coroner within whose district the remains were recovered. An Garda Síochána may request the Director to suspend work relating to the excavation on the grounds that a criminal investigation relating to a person or persons buried at the site can be conducted. The Director will be required to comply with the request and assist the investigation by An Garda Síochána.

Research Funding

275. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on the recently concluded agreement to include Israel in Horizon Europe until 2027; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56530/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Following the conclusion of the formal negotiations by the European Commission with Israel on Israel's association to the Horizon Europe Framework Programme for Research & Innovation in October, the Commission has launched the process to formalise the agreement and aims to sign the agreement before the end of the year.

Member States have no formal role in the development of Israel's association agreement.

Promoting international cooperation has long been a cornerstone of the European research and innovation framework programmes. It drives scientific excellence and enables Europe's researchers to collaborate with the best researchers globally.

The pandemic has accelerated and strengthened the importance of global interaction. Now more than ever we need to work together and pool our finite resources to maximise the contribution that investment in research and innovation can make to addressing the significant economic, environmental and societal challenges we face.

From a European perspective, joint research efforts with Israel have resulted in many success stories across different thematic priorities for the EU including climate change, public health, and safe transport.

Israel has also been a partner for Ireland under Horizon 2020 and continued research collaboration is expected under the new programme, Horizon Europe.

Legislative Measures

276. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the status of the higher education governance Bill; when the Bill is expected to be enacted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56612/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The General Scheme of the Higher Education Authority Bill was published on 4 May, 2021. Pre-Legislative Scrutiny on the Bill commenced on 6 July and the Pre-Legislative Scrutiny Report was published on 28 September 2021.

I and my officials have had further engagement with the key stakeholders since 28 September. My officials are currently working with the Office of the Attorney General on finalising the draft Bill. It is expected that drafting on the Bill will be completed within the next few weeks. It will then be submitted to Government for approval and published. The Bill will be introduced to the Oireachtas once it is approved by Government.

Departmental Data

277. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of enrolments and graduates from paramedic courses in each year since 2011, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56614/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The attached Excel spreadsheet contains a response to PQ 56614/21, with the first sheet containing the number of enrolments in paramedic courses, and the second sheet containing the number of graduations.

[<ahref="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-11-18_pq77-18-11-21_en.xlsx ">Enrolments and Graduations Paramedic courses]

Departmental Reports

278. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science when he will publish the economic evaluation of the Cassells report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56615/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): My Department's Statement of Strategy, which I published on 8 March last, contains a commitment to put in place a sustainable funding model for the higher education. This is essential in ensuring that our higher education institutions can effectively meet high standards of quality and performance, and achieve critical outcomes for our economy and society.

The report referred to in the Deputy's question, a comprehensive economic evaluation of the funding options presented in the Report of the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education (2016), was commissioned under the European Commission's Structural Reform Support Programme in November 2019. The final report deliverable was agreed between the Commission (DG Reform) and it's consultants at the end of May 2021.

My Department has commenced its examination of the report's analysis, findings, conclusions and recommendations in order to develop proposals to present to Government to seek it's support to a sustainable future funding model and transformed FET and HE sector as contained in the Statement of Strategy. Once this examination is concluded the report will be submitted to Government for consideration in advance of its publication (pending agreement with the European Commission as the contracting authority).

I have also been engaging with Government colleagues in relation to future funding for this sector as we work towards Government consideration of the report and decision on the key issues.

In terms of funding, in advance of and since the publication of the 2016 a significant programme of re-investment in higher education has been implemented. Since 2015 annual expenditure allocated to higher education has increased by more than 40%. In 2022 this allocation will be in excess of €2billion

This significant allocation of public resources is a clear demonstration of the Government's commitment to meeting the funding needs of the higher education sector.

Departmental Data

279. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of part-time students in public higher education institutes not including non-EU international students; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56616/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Enrolments in part-time courses, by domicile, are shown in the table below.

Domicile	Part-Time Enrolments
Ireland	47,246
Northern Ireland	470
Great Britain	369
Other EU	519
Non-EU (excl. UK)	929
Unknown	125
Total	49,658

These figures are taken from the HEA's statistics from the Student Records System (SRS) which are published on their website at hea.ie/statistics/

Departmental Schemes

280. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will consider amending Article 23 of the student grant scheme 2021 (details supplied) in order that capital allowances can be taken into account when calculating means; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56689/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): As previously outlined to the Deputy, Article 23 of the Student Grant Scheme 2021 deals with the determination of reckonable income. In calculating reckonable income no account is taken of capital assets. Therefore no deduction is given for capital expenditure, regardless of how it is treated for income tax purposes.

I have no plans at present to depart from the above practice in respect of the determination of income.

Third Level Education

281. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research,

Innovation and Science the advice that has issued from his Department to third-level colleges in relation to student placements at present; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56692/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Student placements are organised at the level of each individual Higher Education Institution (HEI), as part of their programme offerings to be delivered in conjunction with relevant placement providers. Where appropriate, each HEI develops their programme offerings to meet the accreditation standards of relevant regulatory and professional recognition bodies (PRBs) including where placements are a requirement.

From the initial onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, significant work was undertaken by a stakeholder group chaired by the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and including the representative bodies of education providers and students to address issues relating to the maintenance of the quality and standards of:

- teaching and learning,

- assessment, and

- qualifications.

This group has focused on the implementation of alternative arrangements and methods of delivery, where appropriate and necessary, to meet both these standards and, where applicable, the educational accreditation criteria established by PRBs.

Since March 2020, QQI has facilitated engagement between members of the stakeholders group and PRBs which have taken place in parallel to direct engagements between PRBs and individual education providers at a local and regional level. These engagements have ensured that, where possible and when necessary, alternative and flexible arrangements are in place for student placements while safeguarding the standards of education and training. These efforts are to ensure that students can progress in their programmes from one academic year into the next, or, where relevant, graduate with the necessary professional competencies that have been set out by the PRBs.

Students should continue to engage directly with their provider for further information on the arrangements being implemented for their particular year and programme.

Human Trafficking

282. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the extent to which the international community remains alert to the activities of terrorist gangs throughout Europe and further afield and currently involved in the trafficking of women and children; the number of prosecutions taken or pending to address these issues; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56784/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): Human trafficking is a heinous crime based on deception and exploitation of vulnerable people. Combatting it is, and will continue to be, a priority for this Government.

Significant efforts are being made by the Government at home and with our partners abroad to combat human trafficking. Ireland and our partners are active on this issue in international fora including the UN, Council of Europe, OSCE and the European Union.

Over the past year we have introduced significant measures to combat trafficking, to create a more victim-centred approach to identifying and supporting victims, and to raise awareness and provide training, such as:

- The approval by Government last May to revise the National Referral Mechanism framework to make it easier for victims of trafficking to come forward, to be identified and to access advice, accommodation and support;

- The drafting of a new National Action Plan on Human Trafficking;

- The development of training, through NGOs, targeting front line staff in industries such as hospitality, airline and shipping who may come into contact with trafficked persons;

- The improvements being made to the Criminal Justice System to support victims through the implementation of *Supporting a Victim's Journey* ;

- The launch of a new awareness raising campaign last month in partnership with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) to build on the success of previous campaigns:

- An increase in funding for supporting victims of crime generally and increased funding dedicated specifically to supporting victims of trafficking.

In addition to highlighting the ongoing work underway to combat human trafficking and support those who are victims of it, it is also important to note the significance of the recent sentences for human trafficking handed down by the Courts and to acknowledge the dedication of An Garda Síochána in investigating and tackling this hideous crime.

Human trafficking cases are complex and it can be challenging to secure convictions, for a range of reasons including difficulties in securing sufficient evidence to prove beyond a reasonable doubt the existence of coercion or deception of the victim.

The majority of victims of human trafficking are vulnerable and traumatised by their experience. Estimating the prevalence of human trafficking is difficult due to the clandestine nature of the crime, its overlap with other illegal activities and there can be a reluctance on the part of victims to report the crime, often due to the trauma they have suffered. In some instances, victims may also be concerned about potential repercussions that reporting human trafficking might have for their extended family.

As the Deputy may be aware, the changes we propose making to the National Referral Mechanism acknowledge that, in addition to An Garda Síochána, other state bodies and NGOs have a role in identifying victims of human trafficking and linking them in with the various supports and services available.

An Garda Síochána is excellent in its role as our competent authority for identifying victims but we know some victims, because of interactions they may have had with law enforcement officials in other countries, have a perception that police cannot be trusted. We want to be sure that every victim of trafficking who ends up in Ireland is identified and helped. That's why we are proposing to provide a role for other State and non-state organisations in the identification of victims of trafficking.

An Garda Síochána has committed significant resources to the investigation and prosecution of human trafficking in Ireland. A specialised Garda Unit, the Human Trafficking Investigation and Co-ordination Unit (HTICU), has been in place since 2009 to conduct investigations into human trafficking. It also provides advice, support and where necessary, operational assistance to investigations at district level. An Garda Síochána is also active in relation to trafficking

gangs through work targeting organised crime - targeting their finances, their use of the internet and by working closely with other jurisdictions.

A High Level Group established in November 2019, which includes An Garda Síochána, my Department and the Office of the DPP, meets regularly and keeps the legislative and operational framework for investigation and prosecution of trafficking under review.

Between 2009 and 2020 there were 713 victims of human trafficking recognised by An Garda Síochána, including 494 females.

As the Deputy is aware, the decision about whether or not to prosecute a person, and for what crime, is entirely a matter for the Director of Public Prosecutions and I, as Minister, have no role in such matters.

Departmental Priorities

283. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Justice the reports that she has received from the Independent Reporting Commission to date in relation to its work of building a peaceful Northern Ireland; the actions taken on foot of these reports; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56480/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): To facilitate monitoring of the implementation of measures aimed at ending paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland, the Fresh Start Agreement provided for the establishment by the two Governments of the Independent Reporting Commission. An international agreement between Ireland and the UK establishing the Independent Reporting Commission was signed in Dublin on 13 September 2016 and it was given effect to by legislation in both jurisdictions.

In summary, the Commission's functions are to report annually on progress towards ending continuing paramilitary activity connected with Northern Ireland; report on the implementation of the relevant measures of the three administrations; and to consult with relevant stakeholders in this regard.

The Commission submitted its first report to the Governments in 2018, the second in 2019, and the third last year. As the Deputy will be aware, the two Governments have published the Commission's first three reports and the fourth report is due in the coming weeks.

I and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland have welcomed the reports. They provide an opportune reminder of the continuing adverse impact of paramilitarism on society in Northern Ireland. The Reports set out a pathway to achieving progress both through the policing and criminal justice response and a response to the wider socio-economic factors that exist in the communities where paramilitaries continue to operate. The Commission refers to this as the twin track approach. This requires a whole of Government focus and the Commissioners are encouraged that that is reflected in the second phase of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme in Northern Ireland which runs to 2024.

The Commission, in their Reports, note the extent and effectiveness of the co-operation between the Authorities in both jurisdictions to tackle paramilitary activity and associated criminality.

As well as reminding us of what needs to be done to tackle paramilitarism, the reports also point to the steady progress on the 43 Actions set out in the Executive Action Plan for Tackling Paramilitary Activity. Reporting on the vast majority of the actions falls to the Tackling Para-

militarism Programme Team located at the Northern Ireland Department of Justice. A small number of the actions apply to actions and commitments made by the UK and Irish Governments as part of the Action Plan. Every year the Governments update the Commission on these actions.

In each report, the Commission also makes a number of recommendations and these are reported on in the following years.

I, as Minister for Justice, and my predecessor have met with the Commission to hear about the progress the Commission has been making in carrying out its functions and to provide any assistance this Government can offer to achieve its task. These meetings with members of the Commission have always been very informative and constructive. The Commission has been very active in pursuing its remit and has had a wide engagement with a range of relevant stakeholders, both North and South. Although it is evident that much productive work has taken place in the last few years, it is clear that more needs to be done.

I look forward to receiving the Commission's fourth report.

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

284. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice the information that has been brought into the public domain regarding the deaths of children at the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home at Tuam, County Galway that has been the subject of any criminal investigation; if excavations will take place at the site; the next steps that will be taken to secure the full information as the incidents which occurred at this home; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56598/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I have requested the information sought by the Deputy from An Garda Síochána, but I have not received this information in time. I will write directly to the Deputy as soon as the information is to hand.

Citizenship Applications

285. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Justice when a person (details supplied) will receive a decision on a citizenship application; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56613/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): An application for a certificate of naturalisation was received from the person referred to by the Deputy on 4 February 2020. This application is currently being processed with a view to establishing whether the applicant meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision as expeditiously as possible.

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

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

In addition, the combined impact of the 2019 High Court judgment in the Jones case and the necessary health restrictions arising from the pandemic, has resulted in the processing time for standard applications increasing.

However, my Department is taking a number of steps to speed up the processing of applications and a number of digitisation measures have also been introduced to increase efficiency in the process, including eTax clearance, eVetting and online payments. The end result of the digitisation process will be to free up more staff to focus on processing applications in a timely and efficient manner, to improve service to our customers and reduce waiting times.

This year, we are on track to deliver approximately 11,000 decisions, significantly exceeding the levels achieved in the last two years. Additional staff have also been assigned to the citizenship team. Based on these measures, my Department's objective is to achieve an improved timeframe of 6-9 months for decisions on a majority of applications during 2022.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility 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.

An Garda Síochána

286. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice if cautions given by gardaí to those found in possession of small quantities of cannabis can impact on Garda vetting they may need in the future; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56619/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Deputy will be aware that Garda vetting is an operational matter for An Garda Síochána. Neither I, as Minister, nor my Department have any role in the processing of individual vetting applications.

I am advised by the Garda authorities that when a person is vetted for a role that is within the definition of 'relevant work or activities' as outlined in the National Vetting Bureau (Children & Vulnerable Persons) Acts, it is normal practice as part of the Garda vetting procedure to assess whether a vetting disclosure shall include particulars of the criminal record (if any) relating to the person and a statement of the specified information (if any) relating to the person, or a statement that there is no criminal record or specified information in relation to the person.I am informed that a criminal record in relation to a person means a record of the person's convictions, whether within or outside the state for any criminal offence, together with any ancillary or consequential orders made pursuant to the convictions concerned, or a record of any prosecutions pending against the person whether within or outside the state for any criminal offences or both.I am advised that Adult Cautions issued by An Garda Síochána do not fall within the definition of Criminal Record outlined. This being the case, Adult Cautions given by Gardaí to those found in possession of small quantities of cannabis are not considered for inclusion in vetting disclosures as criminal records.

It is important to note that an Adult Caution for offences under Section 3 (simple possession) of the Misuse of Drugs Act - relating to the possession of cannabis and cannabis resin only - can only be considered in respect of an offence committed on or after the 14 December 2020 and cannot be applied retrospectively.

Whether or not the possession of any individual cannabis product or derivative, in any spe-

cific case, warrants the issue of an Adult Caution is at the discretion of the individual member of An Garda Síochána concerned, however the final decision to issue a caution under the scheme rests with the relevant Inspector or Superintendent. These individual decisions and cases are operational matter for An Garda Síochána, and as Minister I have no role in these matters.

Courts Service

287. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice the timeline for the review and the publishing of the report into the Special Criminal Court. [56694/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I understand the Deputy's question to refer to the independent review of the Offences against the State Acts.

As the Deputy will be aware, in February last I established a Review Group chaired by Mr Justice Michael Peart, former Judge of the Court of Appeal.

The group comprises a number of experts in this field and is tasked with examining all aspects of the Offences Against the State Acts having regard to the current threat posed by domestic/international terrorism and organised crime, the duty to deliver a fair and effective criminal justice system to ensure the protection of communities and the security of the State and Ireland's obligations in relation to Constitutional and ECHR rights and international law.

The Chair has indicated to me that there is a considerable body of work involved. The review requires a detailed analysis of a series of complex and inter-related legal provisions. Nevertheless I know the Review Group is conscious of the need to complete its work with as much expedition as is consistent with such a comprehensive task and I am grateful to all the members for their commitment.

The review group submitted its interim report in June and indicated that it is expected the final report will be completed by the end of April 2022 and will be published thereafter.

Road Traffic Accidents

288. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Justice the number of road traffic collisions at Oberstown Cross, Oberstown, Tara, County Meath in the past 12 months; the dates of same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56712/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I have requested the information sought by the Deputy from An Garda Síochána, but I have not received this information in time. I will write directly to the Deputy as soon as the information is to hand.

Citizenship Applications

289. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Justice the status of a citizenship application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56736/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): An application for a certificate of naturalisation from the person referred to by the Deputy is currently being processed with a view to establishing whether the applicant meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisa-

tion and will be submitted to me for decision as expeditiously as possible.

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

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

In addition, the combined impact of the 2019 High Court judgment in the Jones case and the necessary health restrictions arising from the pandemic, has resulted in the processing time for standard applications increasing.

However, my Department is taking a number of steps to speed up the processing of applications and a number of digitisation measures have also been introduced to increase efficiency in the process, including eTax clearance, eVetting and online payments. The end result of the digitisation process will be to free up more staff to focus on processing applications in a timely and efficient manner, to improve service to our customers and reduce waiting times. This year, we are on track to deliver approximately 11,000 decisions, significantly exceeding the levels achieved in the last two years. Additional staff have also been assigned to the citizenship team. Based on these measures, my Department's objective is to achieve an improved timeframe of 6-9 months for decisions on a majority of applications during 2022.

Community Care

290. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the investment by the HSE through its service level agreement with ShannonDoc for community healthcare services in County Clare in each of the years 2017 to 2021 inclusive. [56690/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Disability Services

291. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Health the number of children screened or assessed for speech and language therapy at the Spraoi Centre, Portlaoise in 2020 and to date in 2021. [56585/21]

292. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Health the number of children on the waiting list for speech and language therapy in the Spraoi Centre, Portlaoise; and the number waiting in excess of six and 12 months, respectively. [56588/21]

294. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Health the number of children on the waiting list for physiotherapy in the Spraoi Centre, Portlaoise; and the number waiting in excess of six and 12 months, respectively. [56590/21]

295. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Health the number of children on the waiting list for occupational therapy in the Spraoi Centre, Portlaoise; and the number waiting in excess of six and 12 months, respectively. [56591/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I propose to take Questions Nos. 291, 292, 294 and 295 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. 292 answered with Question No. 291.

Community Care

293. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Health the locations in which the 96 community healthcare networks across Ireland in addition to the establishment of specialist community teams for older persons and those with chronic conditions as per the enhanced community care programme. [56589/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Question No. 294 answered with Question No. 291.

Question No. 295 answered with Question No. 291.

Health Services Staff

296. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health when staff will be put in place in the resilience social care residential centre (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56603/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): 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.

Medical Cards

297. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Health the status of a medical card application (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56604/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the Health Service Directive for direct reply to the Deputy.

Medical Aids and Appliances

298. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health when an electric chair riser can be provided to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56607/21]

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

299. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health the total mental health budget divided by its allocation to each of the nine CHO areas in each of the years 2018 to 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56622/21]

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.

Health Services

300. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the number of new residential places that will be provided in 2022 not including those who have a residential service already and are transferring to a better living situation; and his proposals to deal with the urgent needs of the 800 persons minimum currently waiting. [56623/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): The government is committed to improving the lives of people with disabilities and their families through enhancing the quality of services and supports they receive.

Budget 2022 provides funding of €13m for increased residential places on a planned basis as well as for more urgent care situations.

The 2022 HSE National Service Plan is being developed. The Plan will set out the type and volume of health and personal social services to be provided by the HSE in 2022, in line with priorities set out by the Minister for Health, and the longer-term transformation agenda for health and social care services in Ireland. The quantum of services to be provided by the HSE is being considered as part of the National Service Planning process. The Service Plan will be finalised in the coming weeks.

Nursing Homes

301. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons under 65 years of age inappropriately placed in nursing homes that will be supported to leave nursing homes using the €5.5 million funding to be provided in 2022. [56624/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): Nursing homes can be an appropriate care option where the person concerned has a clinically assessed complex medical and social care requirement which cannot be supported in the person's home. However, for some people under the age of 65, nursing homes are not an appropriate placement and alternative, more sustainable supported living solutions are needed to give them greater independence and choice in their daily lives.

The Programme for Government is committed to providing a pathway to eliminate the practice of accommodating young people with serious disabilities in nursing homes.

€3m was allocated to a HSE led pilot project in 2021 to assist 18 people inappropriately placed in nursing homes to move to more appropriate housing options in the community. Budget 2022 provides an additional allocation of €5.5m to the same objective.

The 2022 HSE National Service Plan is being developed. The Plan will set out the type and volume of health and personal social services to be provided by the HSE in 2022, in line with priorities set out by the Minister for Health, and the longer-term transformation agenda for

health and social care services in Ireland. The quantum of services to be provided by the HSE is being considered as part of the National Service Planning process. The Service Plan will be finalised in the coming weeks.

Vaccination Programme

302. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Health the way an Irish citizen or legal permanent residents who receive their vaccine in the United States of America can get their booster shot in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56628/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The immunisation programme in Ireland is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The NIAC makes recommendations on vaccination policy to my Department based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international best practices in relation to immunisation.

On 15 November, the NIAC recommended that a booster dose of an mRNA vaccine be offered to persons aged 16-59 years with underlying conditions, all residents in Long Term Healthcare Facilities and persons aged 50-59 years. The Chief Medical Officer has endorsed the latest NIAC recommendations and written to the HSE requesting they be operationalised as soon as possible.

The NIAC has previously recommended that a booster dose of an mRNA vaccine be offered to those aged 60 years and older and healthcare workers. The booster dose should be given after an interval of six months (or at least five months) following the last dose of any authorised COVID-19 vaccine. I have accepted this advice and the HSE has made the necessary arrangements to operationalise these recommendations with the booster rollout now underway

In line with the approach implemented for the primary vaccination programme, individuals resident in the State will be eligible to receive a booster dose of Covid-19 vaccine when deemed appropriate for their specific cohort in line with NIAC advice.

Operational responsibility for the Covid-19 vaccination programme is with the HSE any queries relating to access to a vaccine should be directed to them.

Disability Services

303. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the number of children waiting on an ASD service; the average waiting time after completion of an assessment of needs by CHO area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56630/21]

304. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the number of interventions received on average since their initial intervention after a child is identified as needing an ASD service after completion of an assessment of needs in the first 12 months by CHO area in the past five years in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56631/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I propose to take Questions Nos. 303 and 304 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. 304 answered with Question No. 303.

Medical Cards

305. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on waiting lists for hearing aids through the medical card scheme in each of the years 2017 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56632/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Medical Cards

306. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on waiting lists for hearing aids through the medical card scheme in County Meath in each of the years 2017 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56633/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Medical Cards

307. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on waiting lists for hearing aids through the medical card scheme in County Westmeath in each of the years 2017 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56634/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Medical Cards

308. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on waiting lists for hearing aids through the medical card scheme in each of the years 2017 to 2020 and to date in 2021, by county in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56635/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Medical Cards

309. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health the average number of patients waiting for a hearing aid installation through the medical card scheme in County Meath by wait time intervals of 3, 6, 9, 12, and 18 months and over in each of the years 2015 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56636/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Medical Cards

310. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health the average number of patients waiting for a hearing aid installation through the medical card scheme in County Westmeath for wait time intervals of 3, 6, 9, 12 and 18 months and over in each of the years 2015 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56637/21]

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

311. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if pregnant healthcare workers will be afforded the opportunity to move to a non-patient facing role due to rising Covid-19 case numbers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56643/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy in relation to this matter.

Vaccination Programme

312. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if medically vulnerable children over 12 years of age and medically vulnerable adults under 60 years of age will be included in the Covid-19 vaccine booster programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56644/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The immunisation programme in Ireland is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The NIAC makes recommendations on vaccination policy to my Department based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international best practices in relation to immunisation.

On 15 November, the NIAC recommended that a booster dose of an mRNA vaccine be offered to persons aged 16-59 years with underlying conditions, all residents in Long Term Healthcare Facilities and persons aged 50-59 years. The Chief Medical Officer has endorsed the latest NIAC recommendations and written to the HSE requesting they be operationalised as soon as possible

The NIAC had previously recommended an additional mRNA dose should be given to those aged 12 years and older with immunocompromise associated with a suboptimal response to vaccination who have completed their primary vaccination course. The third dose of an mRNA vaccine should be given a minimum of two months after the last dose of the primary vaccination schedule.

The NIAC will continue to examine emerging evidence regarding booster vaccines for others in the population where there is evidence of waning immunity and reduced effectiveness and will make further recommendations if required.

Medical Cards

313. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health the amount spent on hearing

aid installations for County Meath through the medical card scheme in each of the years 2015, 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56660/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Medical Cards

314. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health the amount spent on hearing aid installations for County Westmeath through the medical card scheme in each of the years 2015, 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56661/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Medical Cards

315. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health the amount spent on hearing aid installations in each county through the medical card scheme in each of the years 2017 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56662/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Home Help Service

316. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health the steps he is taking to address the lack of available home support service carers in an area (details supplied); the number of persons in the area who have been approved for home support but whose service has not commenced due to lack of carers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56670/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Covid-19 Tests

317. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if the Rapid Testing Expert Advisory Group has provided him with guidance and or advice since its last interim report; and if so, if he will publish that advice. [56678/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I have established an Expert Advisory Group on Rapid Testing, chaired by Professor Mary Horgan, Consultant in Infectious Diseases at Cork University Hospital and President of the Royal College of Physicians.

The group will support and advise government departments, who are responsible for progressing pilots and the rollout of rapid tests in their respective sectors. It will also be responsible

for communicating to the general public.

The membership of the group and it's terms of reference are available at www.gov.ie/en/press-release/e2767-minister-donnelly-establishes-expert-advisory-group-on-rapid-testing/

Minutes of the Groups meetings and other relevant documents are published at www.gov.ie/en/collection/8b585-minutes-and-agendas-from-meetings-of-the-rapid-testing-expert-advisory-group/

The RTEAG has provided advice to the Minister on using RADT as an additional layer of public health measures which was also provided to NPHET to form part of their deliberations. This advice was reflected in the CMO's letter to the Minister on 11 November.

Medical Aids and Appliances

318. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health when an inflatable seat will be granted for a person (details supplied) with very limited mobility; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56679/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Primary Care Centres

319. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the number of primary healthcare centres in County Clare in each of years 2017 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [56684/21]

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

320. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the number of primary healthcare centre staff employed in each of the years 2017 to 2020 and to date in 2021 on a whole-time equivalent basis in tabular form. [56685/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Disability Services

321. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons that have accessed day disability services in each of the years 2017-2020 and to date in 2021 in County Clare in tabular form. [56686/21]

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.

General Practitioner Services

322. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the number of Shannon-Doc services and locations that were operational across County Clare in each of the years 2017 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [56687/21]

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

323. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the number of whole-time equivalent professionals that have been working in County Clare mental health services in each of the years 2017 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [56688/21]

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.

Legislative Programme

324. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the status of the support for Irish survivors of thalidomide Bill; if he will meet with a representative organisation (details supplied) regarding this Bill; the reason he previously refused a request to meet with this organisation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56697/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): There are a number of cases concerning thalidomide before the High Court at present and it is not possible to comment on matters that are sub judice. As certain members of the representative organisation and I are on opposing sides of the extant litigation, it is not appropriate for me to meet with the representatives, in these circumstances.

The Deputy may be aware that following an Irish Government decision in January 1975, the Government granted an ex-gratia sum equivalent to 4 times the German lump-sum and an ex-gratia monthly allowance for life equal to the German monthly allowance, to each of the Irish children found to have thalidomide related injuries. There are currently 29 Irish people in receipt of ex-gratia monthly payments from the Department of Health. The annual figure for the Irish monthly payments ranges from €6,175 to €13,313 for each individual. The rate of payment is related to each survivor's level of thalidomide related injury.

The German monthly payments are made by the Contergan Foundation, which is established under German legislation. From 1 August 2013, the Foundation substantially increased its monthly payments to thalidomide survivors, including Irish survivors. Both the German payments and the Irish ex-gratia payments made to the survivors are exempt from tax, including DIRT and are not reckonable as means for the purpose of Social Welfare payments. The rate of payment is related to the survivors' level of thalidomide related injury.

In addition to the initial lump-sum and monthly payments for life, the supports provided by the Irish State to each Irish survivor include a medical card on an administrative basis regardless of means, provision of appliances, artificial limbs, equipment, housing adaptations and access to a full range of primary care, hospital and personal social services. There is a designated se-

nior manager in the Health Service Executive who liaises with Irish thalidomide survivors and assists them to access supports towards their ongoing health and personal social service needs.

Work is underway in the Department to bring forward Heads of a Bill to provide these health and personal social supports on a statutory basis to Irish thalidomide survivors. While it is not possible at this stage to provide a timeframe for these legislative proposals, the Government is committed to the ongoing support of Irish thalidomide survivors.

It is important to note that the German Contergan Foundation has confirmed that since 2013 it is accepting applications from individuals for compensation for thalidomide related injury. It is open to any Irish person to apply to the Foundation for assessment of their disability as being attributable to thalidomide. Any Irish person who establishes that their injury is attributable to thalidomide will be offered appropriate supports by the Irish Government, commensurate with those currently provided to Irish thalidomide survivors.

Health Services

325. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health his views on developing an entirety of life pathway for survivors of strokes; the work that has been carried out in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56702/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Hospital Services

326. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Health the overall operational spend in each hospital (details supplied) over the past five years; the whole-time equivalent number of staff in each for the period in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56708/21]

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 Staff

327. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Health if he will undertake to withdraw a job specification for a position (details supplied) at University Hospital Waterford and readvertise the position for a cardiologist only in order to facilitate filling the post; if not, the clinical reasons this specification is required; the other percutaneous coronary intervention cath lab services nationally that demand and mandate such dual accreditation; the details of the changes that have occurred in the present University Hospital Waterford service delivery plan that require this dual accreditation; the way the retention and filling of this job specification will assist expanding the cardiac cath lab hours at the hospital which have remained static despite a commitment from the Government to provide adequate resourcing for such expansion to begin in February 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56709/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Departmental Data

328. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of children on school age team or the new equivalent on the psychology waiting lists that have been also referred to primary care psychology by county in each of the years 2018 to 2020 an to date in 2021, in tabular form. [56713/21]

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

329. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of children on school age team or new equivalent on psychology waiting lists that have been also referred to primary care psychology and that referral was not accepted by county in each of the years 2018 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form [56714/21]

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

330. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the actions taken to date to address the longstanding difficulties in recruiting a psychologist to the disability services team in the HSE health centre, Longford Road, Mullingar as acknowledged by the complaints officer that the current staffing levels are not sufficient to provide a full service. [56715/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As the Deputy's question relates to a service matter , it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

Mental Health Services

331. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health if he will intervene on behalf of a child (details supplied). [56716/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Mental Health Services

332. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of complaints made to the Your Service Your Say that relate to psychology services in counties Longford and Westmeath in each of the years 2018 to 2020 and to date in 2021. [56717/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Charges

333. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health the progress that is being made to reduce hospital car parking charges particularly for those with sick children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56718/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The *Programme for Government* makes a commitment to introduce a cap on the maximum daily charge for patients and visitors at all public hospitals, where possible and to introduce flexible passes in all public hospitals for patients and their families. I am very aware of the financial burden this issue can cause some patients and families. Accordingly, consideration is being given to how best to ensure this commitment is addressed, taking account of existing arrangements already in place.

General Practitioner Services

334. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the total number of general practitioner practices in the country; the number of general practitioner practices at the moment that are awaiting the appointment of a permanent general practitioner to them by urban and rural areas; the steps he plans to take to address this issue though additional targeted incentives; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56724/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): GPs are self-employed private practitioners. Under the GMS scheme, the HSE contracts individual GPs, and not GP practices, to provide medical services without charge to medical card and GP visit card holders. Where a vacancy arises in a practice with a GMS contract, the HSE becomes actively involved in the selection process to find a replacement GP.

As of 1 November 2021, there are 2,551 GPs with GMS contracts. Twenty four panels, or less than 1%, are vacant. Thirteen panels are in rural areas and 11 are in urban areas. In each case a locum or other appropriate arrangement has been put in place to maintain GP services to the communities in question.

The Government is aware of the workforce issues currently facing general practice in certain areas and a number of measures to improve recruitment and retention in general practice have been implemented.

These measures include an increase in investment in general practice by approximately 40% (€210 million) between 2019 and 2023 under the terms of the 2019 GMS GP Agreement GP. The Agreement provides for increased support for GPs working in rural practices and for those in disadvantaged urban areas, and for improvements to maternity and paternity leave arrangements. In addition, the number of GPs entering training has been increased steadily over the past ten years, rising from 120 in 2009 to 233 in 2021, with further increases expected.

These measures will see an increase in the number of GPs working in the State, improving access to GP services for patients throughout the country.

General Practitioner Services

335. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the total number of general practitioner practices located in areas in which the Irish language is used as a common daily means of communication; the number of these that can provide patient services in the Irish lan-

guage; the steps he plans to take to attract Irish speakers to such positions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56725/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Covid-19 Pandemic

336. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health if he plans to extend the opening hours of the Covid-19 testing centre in the National University of Ireland Galway by keeping it open seven days a week rather than five days as at present in view of its accessibility to persons particularly on the west side of the city and from Connemara and in order to increase testing capacity in the city; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56734/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Vaccination Programme

337. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health if the EU Digital COVID Certificate will be updated to include details of the booster vaccine currently being administered to persons over 60 years of age; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56739/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2021/2014 of 17 November 2021 amending Implementing Decision (EU) 2021/1073 laying down technical specifications and rules for the implementation of the trust framework for the EU Digital COVID Certificate established by Regulation (EU) 2021/953 was adopted by the Commission on 17 November and published on 18 November in the Official Journal.

The technical specifications in this Implementing Decision relating to additional Covid vaccination doses are being considered with a view to the issuing of certificates for booster doses.

Vaccination Programme

338. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the details of the Covid-19 vaccine booster programme; if consideration is being given to a shortening of the timeline between a person getting the second vaccine and their eligibility for the booster vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56747/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The immunisation programme in Ireland is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The NIAC makes recommendations on vaccination policy to my Department based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international best practices in relation to immunisation.

On 15 November the NIAC recommended that a booster of an mRNA vaccine be offered to persons aged 16-59 years with underlying conditions, all residents in Long Term Healthcare Facilities and persons aged 50-59 years.

The booster dose should be given after an interval of six months or longer following completion of the primary course of any two-dose Covid-19 vaccine. A minimum interval of five

months may be used when necessary for operational reasons. Recipients of Covid-19 vaccine Janssen should receive an mRNA booster dose after an interval of three months.

The NIAC has previously recommended that a booster dose of an mRNA vaccine (irrespective of whether the primary vaccination course was of an mRNA or adenoviral vector) be offered to those aged 60 years and older and healthcare workers. The booster dose should be given after an interval of six months (or at least five months) following the last dose of any authorised Covid-19 vaccine.

The NIAC will continue to examine emerging evidence regarding booster vaccines for others in the population where there is evidence of waning immunity and reduced effectiveness, and will make further recommendations if required.

Vaccination Programme

339. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health when the portal will open for Irish citizens who have received a vaccine outside of the European Union and the UK to request an EU Digital COVID Certificate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56748/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The EU Digital COVID Certificate is a document which is issued to help facilitate enable the safe and free international movement of people across the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic. The EU Digital COVID Certificate Regulation allows for Digital COVID Certificates to be provided to Union citizens vaccinated in a third country provided that the Member State has been provided with reliable proof of vaccination.

From the 18 November the EU Digital COVID Certificate Third Country portal is accessible to all eligible Irish passport holders vaccinated outside of the EU.

This portal will accept applications from individuals vaccinated in a third country, outside of the EU Member States and countries which have been awarded an equivalence decision, who are 18 years of age and older, hold a valid Irish passport, and a reliable proof of vaccination for a vaccine type currently authorised for use in Ireland.

Vaccination Programme

340. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the status of the Covid-19 vaccination booster programme; the timelines for delivery for all cohorts in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56760/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The immunisation programme in Ireland is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The NIAC makes recommendations on vaccination policy to my Department based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international best practices in relation to immunisation.

On 15 November, the NIAC recommended that a booster dose of an mRNA vaccine be offered to persons aged 16-59 years with underlying conditions, all residents in Long Term Healthcare Facilities and persons aged 50-59 years. The Chief Medical Officer has endorsed the latest NIAC recommendations and written to the HSE requesting they be operationalised as soon as possible.

The NIAC has previously recommended that a booster dose of an mRNA vaccine (irre-

spective of whether the primary vaccination course was of an mRNA or adenoviral vector) be offered to those aged 60 years and older and healthcare workers. The booster dose should be given after an interval of six months (or at least five months) following the last dose of any authorised Covid-19 vaccine. I have accepted this advice and the HSE has made the necessary arrangements to operationalise these recommendations with the booster rollout now underway.

The HSE has operational responsibility for the rollout of the Covid 19 booster vaccination programme. As this is an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly as soon as possible.

Hospital Appointments Status

341. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if an appointment will be expedited for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56767/21]

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.

Vaccination Programme

342. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health when the updated HSPC guidelines regarding ventilation in respect of Covid-19 will be published. [56769/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Deputy is advised that updated HPSC guidance building ventilation during COVID-19 will be published on the HPSC's website on 18th November 2021.

Relevant page: Buildings and Facilities Guidance - Health Protection Surveillance Centre (hpsc.ie)

Vaccination Programme

343. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 832 of 19 October 2021, if he will provide as had been requested the number of Covid-19 vaccines that have been procured for Ireland including both vaccines administered and vaccines available for administration; the number procured by vaccine type, that is, manufacturing company; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56815/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Ireland has entered into seven Advance Purchase Agreements (APAs), subject to regulatory approval, for the purchase of Covid-19 vaccine from a range of manufacturers. Four vaccines have been authorised by the European Medicines Agency to date; Comirnaty (Pfizer/BioNTech), Spikevax (Moderna), Vaxzevria (AstraZeneca) and Janssen.

As of 15 November, over 7.7 million doses of the four approved vaccines have been administered since the programme commenced in December, including more than 340,000 booster doses administered to date. More than 92.% of the eligible population have now received a vaccine dose with in excess of 90% having been fully vaccinated.

The table beneath provides an overview of the quantity of vaccines by manufacturer administered in the vaccination programme.

Overview of Covid-19 Vaccine Administered by Supplier (In Millions) as of 15 November.

Vaccine	Doses Administered
Pfizer/BioNTech	5.4
Moderna	0.57
AstraZeneca	1.2
Janssen	.23
Total	7.4

The procurement approach taken by the EU, on behalf of Member States, is to ensure that Member States have access to sufficient quantities of safe and efficacious vaccines across a range of technologies. Participation in the EU procurement process has served to ensure that Ireland has adequate supply of vaccines to meet the needs of its national programme including the rollout of booster doses. From the range of contracts that Ireland has entered into, some of the vaccines have yet to be granted regulatory approval, and final dose quantities and delivery schedules for these have yet to be confirmed. Ireland's existing contractual commitments for currently authorised vaccines are being used and will underpin the continued rollout of the booster programme over the coming months.

Covid-19 Pandemic

344. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if he will give consideration to issuing public health advice in relation to vitamin d supplementation in view of recent findings (details supplied) regarding the importance of vitamin d in protecting against Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56816/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): With regard to Vitamin D supplementation in the population, the Deputy is advised that the existing guidance on vitamin D was updated in November 2020 and advises that in addition to following a healthy diet, adults aged 65 years and older to take a 15 microgram (600 IU) daily supplement for bone and muscle health?.

Available to read here: www.gov.ie/en/press-release/7d595-new-advice-on-vitamin-d-supplement-for-people-aged-65-years-and-older/

Developments in relation to potential interventions are kept under frequent review, and a HIQA evidence synthesis paper on? potential interventions for COVID-19, including vitamin D, prepared for the NPHET, was discussed at its meeting on 26th May 2021.

Available to read here: www.hiqa.ie/sites/default/files/2021-08/Advice-to-NPHET_Interventions-to-prevent-COVID-19.pdf

The NPHET minutes of 26th May are available to read here: www.gov.ie/en/collection/691330-national-public-health-emergency-team-covid-19-coronavirus/#april-june-2021

The Department notes that while numerous studies have been published suggesting an asso-

ciation in relation to the role of vitamin D status and vitamin D supplementation in COVID-19, that the quality of this evidence is low and subject to many confounding factors.

The NPHET has agreed that there is insufficient high-quality evidence with respect to vitamin D in the prevention and treatment of COVID-19, and noted that ongoing developments, particularly Randomised Control Trials, in this area be monitored by the NPHET with guidance reviewed accordingly.

The NPHET agreed that efforts should be made to increase awareness of existing guidance. Adults spending increased time indoors or those who are housebound or in long-term residential care or have dark skin pigmentation are also recommended to take a daily vitamin D supplement.

These recommendations for the use of vitamin D have been incorporated into wider messaging, and additionally are being communicated across the health service, including nursing homes and social care settings, as necessary. The Department of Health issued a communication to the HSE and Nursing Homes Ireland to encourage implementation of guidance on vitamin D in nursing homes in February 2021. Additional communication is planned for November 2021.

The Government will continue to look to the NPHET to provide recommendations with regard to Vitamin D and COVID-19.

Primary Care Centres

345. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the status of plans to provide a primary care centre for Finglas; the timescale involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56817/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Health Service Executive is responsible for the delivery of public healthcare infrastructure projects, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly in relation to this matter.

Food Industry

346. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when the promised food ombudsman will be appointed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56651/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Deputy will be aware of the commitment in the Programme for Government to establish a new office of National Food Ombudsman, or equivalent, which will enforce the Unfair Trading Practices (UTP) Directive and will also have a role in analysing and reporting on price and market data in Ireland. The establishment of such an Office requires primary legislation.

I am happy to advise the Deputy that, in April this year, ahead of the deadline of 1st May 2021, I signed Statutory Instrument No. 198 of 2021 to transpose the UTP Directive directly into Irish law. This was done as an interim measure as it was not possible to enact the primary legislation establishing the Office of National Food Ombudsman, or equivalent, before the May transposition deadline.

Also as an interim measure, I established the UTP Enforcement Authority in my Department pending the finalisation of the primary legislation being prepared to establish the new Office.

This Enforcement Authority has been assigned all of the necessary legal powers to investigate complaints from suppliers, including primary producers, to carry out investigations on its own initiative and to initiate legal proceedings for breaches of the Unfair Trading Practices defined in the Directive.

With regard to the establishment of the new Office of Food Ombudsman or equivalent, the General Scheme of the Bill for the primary legislation is currently being prepared.

As part of those preparations, consideration is being given to the submissions made in response to the public consultation held by the Department earlier this year, as well as to whether the provisions of the UTP Directive need to be extended and to the price and market analysis function of the office.

Once the primary legislation is finalised and the new Office is established, the process for appointing the Head of the Office will be commenced and the Enforcement Authority functions will transfer to the new Office in line with the commitment in the Programme for Government. In the meantime, it is open to suppliers to engage with the Enforcement Authority on any concerns they may have in relation to unfair trading practices.

I am fully committed to ensuring that the Programme for Government commitment is implemented as quickly as possible and I am pleased to say that, as announced in the details of Budget 2022, an indicative €4 million has been provided in the estimates for the establishment of the new Office.

I believe that the Regulations I introduced in April are a significant step in progressing towards a more even playing field for our agricultural and food suppliers, providing them with a service that they can avail of with regard to unfair trading practices.

Forestry Sector

347. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the case of a person (details supplied) is being expedited. [56707/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): An application for the Reconstitution and Underplanting Scheme (RUS – Ash Dieback) was received on behalf of the person named and acknowledged in December 2020. An initial letter was issued to the applicant and his Registered Forester in January seeking a harvest plan as the intention was to essentially clear fell and replant the site. A response to this request was received in February.

My Department received clarification from Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in early May, on the requirement for obtaining a grant of planning or an exemption for certain RUS sites. A letter issued to the applicant and his Registered Forester on 6th May, requesting detail of a grant of planning or an exemption from the local authority. The letter noted that the removal of, in this case, 11.95ha of broadleaves was not an exempted development and not sub-threshold.

As no response to this request has been received, the application cannot be processed further.

Fishing Industry

348. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the outlook for the fishing industry and for fish processors in the coming six months given the new control plan in relation to weighing fish has not yet been approved by the European Commission and is not likely to be approved for some time; the steps he plans taking to mitigate the negative effects this will have on the fishing industry including alternative supports for the industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56728/21]

352. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason for the delay in the completion of control plan for fisheries landings (details supplied); the actions that are being taken to expedite the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56756/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 348 and 352 together.

This is an operational fisheries control matter and such matters are exclusively ones that come within the remit of the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA). Under the Sea Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act, 2006, all operational issues of this nature are exclusively for the SFPA and the Naval Service. As Minister, I am precluded from getting involved in operational control matters such as this.

The standard position, under the Common Fisheries Policy, is that fish must be weighed on the pier. Member States can apply for a derogation to weigh the fish away from the pier and that application must be accompanied by a Control Plan providing necessary levels of assurance to the Commission if they are to decide to grant the derogation. It is at the discretion of the Commission whether or not they grant the derogation.

The EU Commission decision to revoke Ireland's Control plan in respect of weighing states that operators did not have in place a "weighing system fit for purpose", as provided for under point 5 of the control plan and the audit identified manipulation of weighing systems. Moreover, although aware of those shortcomings, Ireland did not take appropriate measures to address such non-compliance, in particular by withdrawing the permission to weigh after transport as foreseen in point 8 of the control plan. Consequently, the control plan does not minimise the risk of systematic manipulation of weighing pelagic catches in Ireland and the under-declaration of catches by operators.

The SFPA submitted a revised draft Control Plan to the EU Commission for review and approval on 22nd September 2021. A new draft plan must be accepted by the Commission and formally adopted by it under its legislation – an EU Commission Decision. Subsequently, the SFPA have advised that it has had comprehensive engagement with DG Mare on the plan. The SFPA advised that it has met industry representatives recently and updated them on the discussions with DG Mare.

During Commissioner Virginius Sinkevicius visit to Killybegs recently, representatives of the fishing industry set out the challenges facing the industry in the absence of a control plan that would allow weighing of fish in factories. In my discussions with the Commissioner, during this visit, I asked him to give as much priority as possible to the Commission's examination of Ireland's draft control plan given the real challenges currently being faced by the industry. The Commissioner and his officials have been made fully aware of the considerations around the timing of any control plan approval, given the commencement of the pelagic fishing season in January 2022.

I will keep the lines of communication open with Commissioner Sinkevicius over the coming weeks so that he understands the challenges that would practically arise if a new Control

plan is not in place for the beginning of the 2022 pelagic season.

Animal Welfare

349. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he plans to classify donkeys as heritage animals in view of their historic role in Irish society; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56733/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine's Genetic Resources Grant Aid Scheme has been in place since 1996. The Scheme has an annual call for projects aimed at supporting the conservation and sustainable use of genetic resources for food and agriculture.

Projects are evaluated by an advisory committee, representing broad national stakeholder interests. Over the years, funding has been provided to a diverse range of projects, including conservation initiatives.

Whilst, at the present time, I am not aware of any projects which involve the classification of donkeys as a native breed, applications and expressions of interest are welcomed from all individuals, groups and bodies to submit projects for the further development of genetic resources conservation in Ireland. Projects applications for the 2022 grant scheme call will be accepted up until Friday 17th December 2021.

Details and contact details are available at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/publication/5d767-genetic-resources-grant-aid-scheme/

Completed applications can be sent either by email to geneticresources2020@agriculture.gov.ie

Harbours and Piers

350. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if there are plans to provide funding towards urgent works that are needed for the oyster pier (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56738/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Oysterbed Pier is owned by Kerry County Council and responsibility for its maintenance and development rests with that Local Authority in the first instance and its parent Department, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage thereafter.

My Department provides funding to assist the coastal Local Authorities, including Kerry County Council, in carrying out small scale projects for the development and repair of Local Authority owned piers, harbours and slipways under the annual Fishery Harbour and Coastal Infrastructure Development Programme, subject to available Exchequer funding and overall national priorities. Between the years 2010-2020, Kerry County Council has received funding of €1.9m under this programme.

In May, I was pleased to announce a 35% increase in the funding being made available to Local Authorities from the 2021 Programme, with Kerry County Council securing funding of over €200,000 to support three projects.

Recently, I received the final report of the Seafood Sector Task Force that I established in

March of this year. The Taskforce examined the impacts on the fishing sector and coastal communities of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and the United Kingdom. The Taskforce has recommended an initiative for the development of publicly owned marine infrastructure and I have asked my Department to urgently examine the report.

Should any application be submitted by Kerry County Council in relation to Oysterbed Pier under any future programme, it will be given due consideration, taking into account the terms and conditions of the scheme, the priority attached by the Council and available Exchequer funding.

Forestry Sector

351. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department will commit to providing a written plan for the next 12 months that commits to baseline levels of licensing and inroads into the backlog in forestry licences; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56749/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): As the Deputy will be aware, both myself and Minister Hackett, who has overall responsibility for the sector, have committed to dealing with the backlog in licensing through the Project Woodland initiative launched earlier this year.

We have invested heavily in resources and operational efficiencies in order to improve output and this is having the desired effect with licence output averaging 113 licences per week in each of the last eight weeks to 12th November.

We are aiming also to have a better mix of licences within that output as I am particularly concerned that afforestation is not enjoying the benefits of other types of licensing.

We hope to sustain and improve on this output and the Department will be producing an updated projection for the issuing of forestry licences in 2022 by end-2021 for communication to all stakeholders.

Question No. 352 answered with Question No. 348.

Forestry Sector

353. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the proposals there are to intensify co-operation with international forestry organisations in relation to research projects which could be carried out in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56768/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) supports a broad range of research, development, and innovation activities to develop the efficiency, sustainability and profitability of the forest sector in Ireland.

Our research programmes provide for the participation of eligible research performing organisations in forestry research including through international collaboration.

In particular, DAFM supports research under the European Research Area Networks (ERA-NETs), which are an established, structured and strategic process where Member States agree,

on a voluntary basis and in a partnership to support international collaborative research.

The objective of the current ERA-NET co-fund Action '*ForestValue – Innovating forest-based bioeconomy'* is to promote increased innovation and competitiveness of the forest-based sector in Europe. Sustainability and modernisation of forestry systems and downstream value chains including innovative business concepts and production technologies will be needed to develop the forestry sector and the European bioeconomy, of which forestry accounts for a large share.

The "*ForestValue* " consortium, of which my Department is a member, consists of 30 partners from different regions as well as second and third countries. One hundred and two research proposals sought funding. Following peer review and the ranking of proposals by a panel of international experts, the Call Steering Committee selected 17 proposals which were recommended for funding.

In addition, my Department, through its national competitive funding programme, also provides collaborative opportunities through direct co-funding with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Northern Ireland and inclusion of other international partners on a self-funding basis.

Greyhound Industry

354. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department records figures pertaining to the number of greyhounds referred to foster centres included on the panel of service providers since the introduction of the Rásaíocht Con Éireann traceability system in January 2021; and if so, if he will provide these figures. [56818/21]

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.

Forestry Sector

355. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of further information requests issued in relation to forestry licence applications in each of the years 2015 to 2020 and to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56819/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department does not routinely keep records of the number of further information requests that issue on forestry licence applications.

Statistics are available for a specific triage exercise recently carried out on a cohort of tree felling licence applications awaiting assessment by an ecologist. This resulted in a batch of further information requests issuing at the end of June, on 420 applications. As approximately half of these requests remained unanswered, 234 (of the initial 420) were issued with reminders week ending 5th November.

This work has resulted in over 800 private tree felling licences issuing since the beginning of June.

Local Authorities

356. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if funding is available from her Department to support local authorities in hosting fireworks displays at Halloween and on New Year's Eve. [56667/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I can confirm to the Deputy that my Department does not provide funding to Local Authorities to host firework displays at Halloween or New Year's Eve.

Community Development Projects

357. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when the proposed changes to the Community Services Programme will be announced following on from the review carried out by a company (details supplied); the mechanism by which existing community groups and Community Service Programme companies can have an input into the ongoing consultation process; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56730/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): My Department's Community Services Programme (CSP) currently supports over 420 community organisations to provide local services through a social enterprise model.

In 2020, an independent review of the Community Services Programme was undertaken by Indecon International Economic Consultants**,** on behalf of my Department. The final report was published on 30 September 2020 and was accompanied by a High Level Action Plan outlining the timeline for the phased implementation for the restructuring of the programme.

My Department and Pobal, who administer the programme on behalf of my Department, are currently working on the restructuring of the programme in conjunction with a Consultative Group, whose membership is secured from key sectoral stakeholders including CSP supported organisations, national organisations, community representatives and social enterprise representatives.

It was initially anticipated that the work on the restructuring of the programme would have completed by the end of 2021/early 2022. However, due to the Covid 19 pandemic, my Department was required to refocus its priorities in order to develop a number of support schemes for community and voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises, including the Stability Fund and the CSP Support Fund, to help organisations who required additional assistance during the crisis period. On 15th November last, I was pleased to announce the approval of a further €1m extension of the CSP Support Fund, to provide further assistance to those organisations most in need.

Pending the transition to the new restructured programme, the scheme is closed to new applications through the expression of interest process. However, there are a number of organisations with plans currently under consideration, and if approved, they will be supported under the programme from January to April 2022 onwards. In addition, it is anticipated that the Programme will open calls to address identified gaps in service delivery in 2022.

Insurance Coverage

358. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if emergency funding will be made available to a community group (details supplied) to secure insurance for a community playground; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [56732/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): The **Community Activities Fund** was launched by my department on Thursday 11th November to support community groups impacted by COVID-19.

This fund will support groups, particularly in disadvantaged areas, with their running costs such as utility or insurance bills, as well as with improvements to their facilities. Groups will also be able to use the funding to carry out necessary repairs and to purchase equipment such as tables and chairs, tools and signage, laptops and printers and training equipment. This fund will provide small grants for community groups impacted by the Pandemic and support facilities such as community centres, men's and women's sheds, parish halls and youth centres.

The Community Activities Fund is under the 2021 Stability Fund and Community Enhancement Programme and is administered by the local LCDCS on behalf of my department. The group mentioned by the Deputy may be eligible to apply for funding to the **Community Activities Fund** and it is recommended that the group contact the LCDC in their area for further details.