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 14, inclusive, answered orally.

Questions No. 15 to 26, inclusive, resubmitted.

Questions Nos. 27 to 40, inclusive, answered orally.

Waste Management

41. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the way he plans to respond to the recent EPA Report on Waste 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61540/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): The EPA's National Waste Statistics Summary Report for 2019 highlights the scale of the challenges we face in waste reduction in Ireland, while also confirming some of the dramatic improvements in waste management over recent years such as the reduction in the use of landfill to deal with municipal waste down from 80% in 2001 to 15% in 2019. The report also indicates that Ireland met all current EU targets in 2019, with the exception of a newly introduced WEEE separate collection target. Notwithstanding these successes, significant challenges remain. As the report states, waste generation in Ireland increased in 2019, while recent changes in EU legislation have introduced stricter targets for recycling and for landfilling of waste.

The Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy, which was published in September last year, contains over 200 measures that will be instrumental in meeting the challenges identified in the EPA report, with a key focus on minimising waste generation and extending the productive life of the materials we use. Some measures have been delivered already, such as the inclusion of soft plastics in the household recycling bin. A large number of transformational measures, such as the introduction of a Deposit and Return Scheme, are well-advance and others will be introduced through the forthcoming Circular Economy Bill, such as provisions to improve segregation of waste in the commercial sector, and a national food waste prevention roadmap.

A new National Waste Management Plan will be published in 2022 which will set out the further actions at local and regional levels required to deliver on the Waste Action Plan and support Ireland's circular economy transition.

Climate Change Policy

42. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his views on the report by an advisory body (details supplied) regarding the implementation gap between climate action policy and action. [61537/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Annual Report of the Climate Change Advisory Council (CCAC) provides independent analysis to Government on Climate Action, to inform ongoing policy development and implementation.

2021 has seen a step change in our approach to climate action, with the signing into law of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, and the publication of the National Development Plan and the Climate Action Plan 2021, reflecting the enhanced ambition set out in the Programme for Government. The significantly strengthened legally binding framework under the Act with clear targets and commitments set in law, will help ensure that Ireland achieves its national, EU and international climate goals and obligations in the near and long-term.

The transition to climate-neutrality will require changes across all sectors of our society and economy, involving collaborative effort by Government, business, communities, and individuals to implement new and ambitious policies, technological innovations, systems and infrastructures. This will also require changes in individual behaviours, including how we work, heat our homes, travel, consume goods and services, and manage our waste. Delivering this is the responsibility of everyone in society.

The CCAC report highlights that a significantly increased climate mitigation effort is required across the agriculture, land-use, built environment and transport sectors, while also recognising the significant progress already made in decarbonising our electricity generation. The Climate Action Plan 2021 sets out a range of new policies, measures and actions to address these sectors, including enhancing organisational capacity to do so.

The National Development Plan has allocated significantly increased funding to climate action, including public transport and retrofitting over the next decade. Government recognises that climate action will require a targeted balance between Exchequer-supported expenditure, taxation policies and regulation. Private investment will be needed to work alongside public funding to achieve our targets.

The National Dialogue on Climate Action will create a comprehensive support structure for widespread public and stakeholder engagement on climate change, empowering people across all areas of society and the economy to adopt more sustainable behaviours, and participate in all aspects of the transition.

The Government also recognises the need for a renewed focus on adaptation to deal with an increase in extreme weather events, as highlighted by the CCAC. Four Government funded Climate Action Regional Offices are supporting Local Authorities in their adaptation efforts.

The CCAC report also emphasises that it is important to acknowledge that the transition will have a cost and preparations will be required to reduce the impact on the most vulnerable. Building on the successful approach in the Midlands, a Just Transition Commission will be established to further support Government in this area.

National Broadband Plan

43. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Com-

munications if the owner or shareholders of National Broadband Ireland have the ability to sell the business and assets of National Broadband Ireland after or before full deployment of the network; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61547/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): The Contract for the National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led intervention, which was signed with National Broadband Ireland (NBI) in November 2019, is a complex and detailed document. It sets out the specific terms of the NBP contract with National Broadband Ireland in respect of the rollout of the high speed broadband network under the State led intervention, which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the over 554,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along some 679 schools.

To protect the State investment and ensure that the NBP milestones and deliverables are met, the contract has been designed to include extensive protections, quality checks, reporting and monitoring obligations.

The NBP Contract provides specific protections in relation to a change in ownership, sale, or change in control of shareholders of NBI. Under the Contract, and up until 12 months after the network build is complete, the prior approval of the Minister is required for any of these events. In the event of a sale of NBI, any new owners will continue to have the same obligations as the original owners.

The Contract also requires the written consent of the Minister prior to the transfer of any interest, direct or indirect, in NBI held by Mr David McCourt. Again, this requirement is in place until 12 months after the network build is complete. It should be noted, however, that approval under these provisions cannot be unreasonably withheld.

In the event that the investors sell the majority of their shareholding in NBI in the first ten years of the Contract, the State will be entitled to clawback a proportion of any profit on sale based on the value of the business at the time of sale.

Energy Prices

44. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will provide an update on the discussions with key energy sector stakeholders which have taken place to date to try and reduce the very high current cost of energy utilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61264/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Government is acutely aware of the impact that the recent increases in energy prices is having on households.This is a global phenomenon and expert commentators, including the International Energy Agency, have attributed this to a range of demand and supply factors that have contributed to a tightening of the European gas market supplies and the upward trend in wholesale gas prices we have witnessed since mid 2020. The best long-term approach for Ireland to insulate consumers from volatility on international wholesale energy markets is to invest in energy efficiency, renewable energy and to expand interconnection with our European and neighbouring markets and to deepen internal electricity market integration.

Government's immediate response to address the increase in domestic energy prices has been to utilise the tax and social welfare system to counter rising costs of living. Budget 2022 increased the weekly rate of the Fuel Allowance so that €914 will be paid to eligible households over the course of this winter. Increases to the Qualified Child Payment, the Living Alone Allowance and an increase to the income threshold for the Working Family Payment were also

announced.

Consumers should continue to switch or engage with their energy supplier and many households could still save on their bills if they did so. As recently as the 9th December, switching supplier could save a customer consuming the average amount of electricity up to €313.

CRU has in place a suite of protections against disconnection that are set out in the Supplier Handbook. In brief, priority customers cannot be disconnected, while vulnerable customers are protected over winter months from 1 November to 31 March each year while a CRU moratoria on disconnections for all customers comes into effect over the Christmas period. Additionally, under the supplier led voluntary Energy Engage Code, suppliers will not disconnect a customer who is engaging with them at any time. Furthermore, due to the ongoing pressure on households, the Government agreed today to provide a once off credit of €100 to every domestic electricity account holder, through their electricity supplier in quarter one of 2022.

National Broadband Plan

45. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the cost within the National Broadband Plan for the use of the infrastructure of Eir over the duration of the contract. [61451/21]

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 679 primary schools.

All bidders as part of the original NBP tender were required to put forward a solution that maximised the use of existing infrastructure such as poles and ducts, pole infrastructure and towers, and masts located throughout the State. The solution proposed by NBI involved predominantly re-using the eir pole and duct infrastructure.

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

As part of the final contract tender National Broadband Ireland included some €900m for infrastructure rental of which circa €800m is forecast to be paid to eir for the rental of poles and ducts over 25 years. These rental charges are fully regulated by ComReg. In the event that there are any price reductions during the 25 years of the NBP Contract, the State will recoup 100% of any reductions to such rentals.

Departmental Schemes

46. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the deposit return scheme will be in operation on-time; if glass will be included in the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61425/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The roadmap for the introduction of a Deposit Return Scheme for plastic bottles and aluminium

cans in Q3 2022 was outlined in the Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy, published in September 2020. I continue to work towards meeting that deadline and the Separate Collection (Deposit Return Scheme) Regulations 2021, which provide the legal framework for the scheme, in particular the terms under which a scheme operator may be approved, were recently signed. The regulations also set out the obligations that will fall to producers, retailers and return point operators under the scheme.

The introduction of a Deposit Return Scheme will assist in reducing single use plastics, thus helping Ireland meet EU targets while promoting a wider circular economy. Materials to be included in the scheme will be those for which Ireland faces immediate, challenging EU recycling and separate collection targets. The scheme will therefore focus on plastic bottles and aluminium beverage cans. Recycling rates in Ireland for glass are significantly above current EU targets.

The Regulations provide that other materials may be considered for inclusion in the Deposit Return Scheme when the scheme is fully established.

Legislative Process

47. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the involvement he or his Department has had in the development of planned legislation in relation to marine protected areas; his views on the progress of maritime planning in the absence of these protected areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61541/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The development of planned legislation in relation to marine protected areas (MPAs) is being led by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage which recently ran a public consultation on the report of the expert advisory group on MPAs entitled "Expanding Ireland's Marine Protected Area Network". My Department responded positively to that report, and is supportive of the need to protect marine biodiversity while also enabling our climate targets to be met.

Work on a revised Offshore Renewable Energy Development Plan (OREDP) has been initiated by my Department. This involves participation across Government and the collation of all available, relevant data on our marine resource. The aim is to provide an evidence base for the identification of areas most suitable for the sustainable development of renewable energy technologies, while also considering marine biodiversity. This work will also be of value to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in the MPA designation process.

Wind Energy Generation

48. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to maximise the benefit from the supply chain opportunity for offshore wind in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61484/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department is currently developing terms and conditions for the first offshore wind auction under the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (ORESS 1) to support the first phase of offshore wind development in Ireland. These proposed terms and conditions include a requirement for each successful project in ORESS 1 to headquarter its operation and maintenance facilities on the island of Ireland. As offshore renewable energy remains an emerging sector in Ireland,

successful projects in ORESS 1 will also be required to complete a Project Delivery Plan Questionnaire, with particular emphasis on domestic supply chain development, to better inform Government policy and design of future ORESS auctions.

As referenced in the Climate Action Plan, a cross-Departmental Offshore Renewable Energy Team, chaired by my Department, is also being established to capture the wider economic and business opportunities associated with the development of offshore renewables in Ireland. This will be set up in conjunction with the Marine2040 groups to ensure consistency across the State maritime planning system. It will include the identification of supporting infrastructure and supply chain opportunities as Ireland's offshore wind industry becomes established.

As part of this work, my Department has been working closely with the Department of Transport and the Irish Maritime Development Office to examine the potential to ensure that Irish ports are in a position to benefit from the offshore wind development programme. The Department of Transport, in conjunction with the Irish Maritime Development Office, has conducted an assessment of the options for Irish State ports to facilitate development of offshore renewable energy in Ireland, and will shortly publish an associated policy statement. The statement will outline the proposed strategy for the provision of infrastructure at ports to facilitate development and future operation of offshore renewable energy projects.

In addition, my Department has also been working with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, who are finalising plans to establish a Shannon Estuary Taskforce. This Taskforce will consider the potential of the Shannon Estuary in terms of regional economic development across transport and logistics, manufacturing, renewable energy and tourism, and will develop a strategy to achieve this potential in 2022.

The offshore renewable sector also has the potential to result in commercial and employment opportunities for Irish firms operating beyond Ireland. In this regard, my Department works closely with Enterprise Ireland, which has, over the last several years, developed the Irish Offshore Wind Cluster, comprising of over 60 Irish companies working in the sector abroad, with the view to transferring this expertise to the domestic market once established in Ireland.

Legislative Measures

49. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he plans to introduce legislation or other measures from an environmental protection perspective to improve air and dust quality around quarries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61493/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Under the Minerals Development Acts 1940 to 1999, my Department is responsible for the regulation of mineral exploration and mining. The Department has no function in respect of the regulation of quarries which is a matter for each relevant local authority under planning legislation which comes within the remit of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Illegal Dumping

50. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the work undertaken by his Department in conjunction with other relevant bodies in enabling the use of CCTV to combat dumping particularly in environmentally sensitive areas;

and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61490/21]

73. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when he expects the use of CCTV to be authorised to combat illegal dumping; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61263/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 50 and 73 together.

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, following consultation with the Data Protection Commissioners, the Department of Justice and the Waste Enforcement Regional Lead Authorities (WERLAs), 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.

National Broadband Plan

51. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number or percentage of households and premises which have yet to receive high speed fibre power broadband; and if he will provide an update on the roll-out of broadband across the country. [61414/21]

61. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of homes that will be passed by National Broadband Ireland by 31 December 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61145/21]

64. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of premises passed to date by the National Broadband Scheme; the number that had been predicted in the contract for the end of 2021; the steps he is taking to ensure the roll-out of the scheme is significantly accelerated in 2022; the estimated number to be passed by the end of 2022; the expected date for the completion of the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61407/21]

66. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of connections that the National Broadband Plan has made in total; and the total projected connections by December 2022. [61450/21]

89. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the roll-out of the National Broadband Plan with specifics in relation to premises passed, connections made and if the 60,000 premises passed target for the end of January will be made. [61545/21]

94. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the degree to which his Department continues to monitor the progress in the delivery of broadband in urban and rural areas throughout the country having particular regard to the increased reliance on electronic communications given the necessity to work from home; if he is satisfied that the progress to date is adequate; if he plans specific measures to accelerate the roll-out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61427/21]

135. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of residential and commercial connections delivered under the National Broadband Plan to date by the location of connections and on a quarterly basis in which they were completed tabular form. [61532/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): I propose to take Questions Nos. 51, 61, 64, 66, 89, 94 and 135 together.

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 679 schools. The NBP roll out is currently a 7 year plan under the contract and deployment is due to be complete by the end of 2026.

Despite the unprecedented challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, NBI has made steady progress on delivery of the new high speed fibre broadband network under the National Broadband Plan. The first fibre to the home connections are successfully connected with over 27,000 premises passed and available for immediate connection. In total, almost 35,000 premises can order or pre-order a connection on the network as of 3 December. This includes residential and commercial premises. NBI has confirmed that over 3,900 premises have been connected as of 6 December and this is increasing on a daily basis. Connections have been made in 11 counties including Carlow, Cavan, Clare, Cork, Galway, Kerry, Limerick, Louth, Monaghan, Roscommon and Tipperary. To date, the level of connections are in line with projections and some areas are exceeding targets, for example, one area has seen almost a 25% take up after only a few months of going live.

In line with a remedial plan to address Covid-19 related delays which was agreed with the Department earlier this year, NBI was to have almost 60,000 premises passed and available for immediate connection by the end of January 2022 (the end of Contract Year 2). As would be expected with a large scale infrastructure build of this nature, challenges have been encountered as a result of Covid-19 and also planning and build related issues. NBI is actively working with its network and build partners to address these issues as they arise and has recently confirmed to my Department that the number of premises passed by the end of December will be in the order of 35,000, while between 50,000 and 60,000 premises will be able to order or pre-order a service by the end of the year. For more than another 120,000 premises, I am advised build work is underway demonstrating the project is reaching scale.

I met with the Board of NBI on 19 November last to restate the priority the Government attaches to this project and the need for urgent resolution of build related issues. I met with the Chair and CEO of both NBI and eir yesterday to reinforce that message.

The focus for 2022 is to continue to build momentum in the build, catch up on the delays experienced and plan for acceleration. Final targets for 2022 are expected to be agreed early in the new year.

Wind Energy Generation

52. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps he is taking to support the development of at least 30GW of offshore wind energy in the long term; his plans to give greater certainty that there will be a potential route to market for this amount of offshore wind energy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61481/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Ireland's increased climate and energy ambition is reflected in the Government target to achieve 5GW of installed offshore wind generation by 2030. There is a further commitment in the Programme for Government to develop a longer-term plan to utilise the potential 30GW of offshore floating wind power in our Atlantic waters. The 5GW target will be primarily met through development of offshore renewable energy (ORE) in Ireland's eastern and southern coastal regions. This reflects the suitability of water depths in these regions for deployment of conventional fixed bottom offshore wind turbines and existing electricity grid infrastructure to connect these projects to the onshore grid.

Subsequent cost-effective deployment of renewables in deeper waters off the west coast, to take advantage of stronger and more consistent wind speeds, should be increasingly feasible through future advances in floating turbine technology.

Development of the Maritime Area Planning Bill is being led by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, with my Department providing input on provisions specific to ORE. The enactment of this Bill will provide a modern, up-to-date regulatory framework that will enable ORE developments beyond the limits of the current foreshore regime. The Bill completed Final Stage in the Dáil on 1 December 2021 and Second Stage in the Seanad on 7 December 2021, with enactment anticipated by the end of the year.

Work on a revised Offshore Renewable Energy Development Plan (OREDP) has also been initiated by my Department. This will provide an evidence base for the identification of areas most suitable for the sustainable development of both fixed and floating wind, wave, and tidal technologies, and will include an assessment of other maritime activities and marine biodiversity setting out the path-way for the development of ORE beyond 2030. In tandem with the OREDP, a comprehensive analysis of long-term routes to market will be undertaken by my Department in 2022.

Cybersecurity Policy

53. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to improve cybersecurity in the public sector in the aftermath of the cyber-attack on the HSE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61430/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): The second National Cyber Strategy published at the end of 2019 sets out a broad suite of measures to strengthen the security of Government networks and ICT systems. The Strategy defines the role of the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) – situated in my Department – to support Government Departments and other public bodies to improve the resilience and security of their IT systems, to better protect services that people rely upon and their data. Recognising the growing dependence on digital services and the evolving global cyber threat landscape, earlier this year Minister Ryan commissioned external consultants to conduct a Capacity Review and to benchmark the NCSC with similar agencies in

Europe and internationally. Minister Ryan and I received the consultants' report in June and in July the Government agreed a number of measures to support the continued development of the NCSC over the coming five years, including:

- Increasing the overall fulltime staffing complement of the NCSC to at least 70 over the next 5 years with a first tranche of an additional 20 staff recruited by end 2022 bringing the serving complement to 45.

- That the General Scheme of a Bill be prepared for Government approval, to establish the NCSC on a statutory basis and provide for related matters including clarity around its mandate.

- That the new role of Director of the NCSC be established at a salary level equivalent to that of Deputy Secretary in the Civil Service.

- That the existing cross-Government group overseeing the implementation of the National Cyber Security Strategy 2019-2024, chaired by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications be tasked with developing an action plan for key elements of the capacity review, sponsoring implementation of the review, and reporting to the Minister/Government as necessary.

- That the future capital budget for the NCSC be informed by a 5-year NCSC technology strategy.

- The NCSC will be accommodated within the Department's new Headquarters (HQ) in Beggars Bush.

- In addition to the creation of 20 new permanent posts in the NCSC, a cyber security graduate training programme would be initiated.

Implementation of the programme of work to deliver on these measures is well underway.

My Department has recently published a baseline cyber security standard to be applied by all Government Departments and key agencies. The NCSC has worked with colleagues across Government to develop the standard which will support public bodies to identify cyber risks, deploy appropriate mitigation measures, and protect personal and other important data. In addition, the Computer Security Incident Response Team (CSIRT) based within the NCSC has developed and deployed technology on the infrastructure of Government Departments to detect and warn of certain types of threat.

Renewable Energy Generation

54. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the safeguards that he will put in place to ensure that communities can access supports for community renewable energy projects and to avoid supporting developers attempting to develop projects through a back door; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61483/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS) is the main Government policy to help deliver on our objective of up to 80% renewable electricity by 2030. The RESS supports communities in a variety of ways, including through a separate category for community projects and a mandatory community benefit fund for every project supported in the scheme.

The Climate Action Plan includes a target for at least 500 MW of renewable electricity to be

supplied by local community-based projects, meaning approximately 100 community projects will be needed to meet this ambition. In order to ensure such a pipeline of community projects I have allocated €2 million in capital funding in Budget 2022 to the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). This funding will enable SEAI to deploy a range of capacity-building supports including an information warehouse, trusted intermediary and advisor services, and financial grant supports, all of which are vital to support community-owned RESS projects development. Some of this enabling framework is already in place with additional elements to be delivered in early 2022.

To ensure genuine community participation for future RESS auctions, only projects 100% owned by a Renewable Energy Community (REC) will be eligible for the separate community category, ensuring that all of the benefits of the project stay in the local area. The REC definition employed in RESS was derived from the REC definition provided through the EU's Clean Energy Package, with particular reference to Article 22 of the recast Renewable Energy Directive (EU) 2018/2001. Accordingly, a REC must be open to all potential local members and its primary purpose should be to provide environmental, economic or social community benefits for the local areas where it operates, rather than financial profits.

Renewable Energy Generation

55. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the estimated output of installed capacity of renewable energy available to the national grid by province; the steps he intends taking in ensuring that all areas of the country and their coastlines contribute equally to this national effort; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61408/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Currently, over 4.5 GW of renewable generation is connected to the electricity grid. The System Operators, EirGrid and ESB Networks, publish every quarter an updated list of individually connected renewable generators on their websites including details of capacity and location.

The indicative electricity capacity targets set out in the Climate Action Plan 2021, envisage up to 8 GW of onshore wind, at least 5 GW of offshore wind and between 1.5 – 2.5 solar PV capacity by 2030. To meet these ambitious targets, it is vital that we take the necessary steps to deliver a more coherent spatial planning framework that supports the delivery of this additional electricity generation and aligns our national targets to the regional level. A series of actions are underway to deliver a more facilitative spatial planning framework for renewable electricity generation development. Specifically, the SEAI's Methodology for Local Authority Renewable Energy Strategies will be revised to provide a best practice approach to identifying and assessing renewable energy resources in spatial planning at local authority level. Furthermore, my Department will set out an approach and target for the total onshore capacity that should be planned for on a national and regional level.

Waste Management

56. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps he will take to reduce the level of single use disposable food containers and coffee cups in Ireland. [61412/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): The forthcoming Circular Economy Bill will provide for the

introduction of environmental levies on single-use disposable items, such as hot and cold beverage cups, and food containers, where more sustainable alternatives are available and affordable.

This approach is based on the very successful experience of the Plastic Bag Levy and the Landfill Levy, both of which have resulted in citizens and businesses adopting more sustainable practices.

The proposed new environmental levies are not primarily intended to be revenue raising measures, but rather to incentive shifts in consumer behaviour away from single-use items and towards re-usable alternatives. Any revenue associated with the new levies will be ring-fenced to fund the new Circular Economy Fund, which the Bill will establish in place of the existing Environment Fund. The new Fund will continue to support environmental protection initiatives while also having a specific mandate to promote the Circular Economy.

The first new environmental levy that will be introduced will be in respect of disposable hot beverage cups, and the necessary regulations will be published as a priority following enactment of the Bill.

The Bill also provides for the subsequent introduction of bans on the sale of those same classes of disposable items initially subject to the new levies, though again only where more sustainable alternatives are available and affordable. While the introduction of levies will be pursued in the first instance, I foresee bans becoming applicable in the medium term.

Departmental Strategies

57. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will expedite the preparation of a national hydrogen strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61422/21]

67. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to develop a hydrogen strategy for Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61482/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 57 and 67 together.

The Climate Action Plan 2021, published last month, identifies green hydrogen as having the potential to support decarbonisation across several sectors and, in particular, in high-temperature heat for industry and in electricity generation. It also sets out how green hydrogen could address some of the challenges faced by the energy sector, such as providing a back-up for intermittent renewables, and key actions including carrying out a work programme to identify a route to deliver one to three TWh of zero emissions gas (including green hydrogen) by 2030.

To help inform national policy development, the SEAI is currently undertaking a National Heat Study, including consideration of the role of green hydrogen, which is expected to be published early next year.

At a European level, the European Commission is proposing a range of changes to European gas markets with a strong focus on hydrogen. This follows on from the hydrogen strategy which they published last year.

My Department continues to work with relevant Departments, agencies and stakeholders

to carry out research and develop policies to support the uptake of green hydrogen. I expect a detailed strategy focussing on the development of green hydrogen to be included in Climate Action Plan 2022.

Climate Action Plan

58. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the way he plans to roll-out district heating on a large scale; if legislative change will be required to achieve this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61423/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The rollout of district heating is supported by several actions under Climate Action Plan 2021.

These include establishment of a Steering Group that will oversee research to inform the development of district heating and that will make recommendations as to how the sector may be financed. The Steering Group will also make recommendations as to appropriate targets for district heating expansion, based on the National Heat Study, which is due to be published by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland next month.

My Department is liaising closely with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and relevant agencies to develop a regulatory framework for district heating along with any legislation that may be required.

I anticipate that the Local Authorities will have a leading role in the development of district heating, as is the case with the Tallaght District Heating Scheme and the Dublin District Heating System, both of which are local authority-led and funded by the Climate Action Fund.

Departmental Schemes

59. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the timeline for the publication of the finalised terms of reference for the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (ORESS 1); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61485/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department is currently developing terms and conditions for offshore wind auctions under the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme. The first such auction, ORESS 1, will support the first phase of offshore wind development in Ireland.

The ORESS 1 auction is scheduled to commence in Q4 2022, subject to a sufficient quantity of eligible projects for a competitive process. A key component of auction eligibility will be for a project to hold a Foreshore Lease or a Maritime Area Consent (MAC). MACs are established under the Maritime Area Planning (MAP) Bill and are expected to be issued to eligible projects by Q3 2022.

A public consultation of the draft ORESS 1 Terms and Conditions was held between October 2021 and December 2021 and over 150 responses were received. My Department will issue a formal response to consultation feedback in Q1 2022, with final Terms and Conditions to be submitted for Government approval in Q2 2022.

Energy Policy

60. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if natural gas will be considered as a transition fuel to help ensure energy security as part of the transition to a low carbon future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61274/21]

87. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications further to Parliamentary Question No. 33 of 4 November 2021, the status of the review of the security of energy supply of Ireland's electricity and gas systems; the timeline for the public consultation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61486/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 60 and 87 together.

The Government's Policy Statement on Security of Electricity Supply, published at the end of last month, sets out that the development of new conventional generation, including gas-fired generation, is a national priority and should be permitted and supported in order to ensure security of electricity supply and support the growth of renewable electricity generation.

The policy statement supports the need to deliver circa 2 GW of new gas-fired generation which is set out in the National Development Plan 2021-2030 and the Climate Action Plan 2021.

The need for this level of new gas-fired generation capacity was identified by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, which has statutory responsibility for security of electricity supply, and EirGrid.

It is important to note that the development of flexible gas-fired generation is to provide security of supply and support increased levels of renewable electricity generation. This new capacity will only run when needed, with renewable generation dispatched in the market first, and therefore the level of associated emissions will be minimised.

In addition, the Department is carrying out a review of security of energy supply of Ireland's electricity and natural gas systems focussing on the period to 2030 in the context of ensuring a sustainable pathway to net zero emissions by 2050.

I expect the technical analysis will be published and the public consultation commenced early next year. It is planned to complete the overall review in mid-2022 following which it will be submitted to Government.

Question No. 61 answered with Question No. 51.

Climate Action Plan

62. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the Climate Action Fund and the inclusion of nature-based projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61340/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): At least €500 million is expected to be available from the Climate Action Fund over the period to 2027 to support projects, initiatives and research that contribute to the achievement of Ireland's climate and energy targets and goals.

To date, just over €140 million has been committed from the Climate Action Fund for a range of projects, including in relation to district heating, EV infrastructure, creative climate action,

co-financing for EU LIFE projects, and a Community Climate Action Programme. Through the Community Climate Action Programme, announced on 10 November 2021, €60 million will be invested in community climate action projects and initiatives, as well as capacity building, over the next three years.

Following on from the commencement of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 earlier this year, nature-based solutions that contribute to climate action are now eligible for support from the fund. In the context of the Community Climate Action Programme, there will be opportunities for relevant nature-based projects and initiatives to be supported under the local climate and environmental action theme of that programme.

As a next step, an open call will be developed for launch in 2022 aimed at providing funding for further projects aligned with the objectives of the Climate Action Plan 2021.

Environmental Policy

63. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will include a curb or ban on car idling in the new national clean air strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61344/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I recognise the correlation between transport-related air pollutant emissions and negative public health impacts, and that idling vehicles can contribute to these levels particularly in urban areas where it is more difficult for emissions to disperse. Among the best ways to reduce emissions from private vehicles across the road network as a whole, is to remove older more polluting vehicles from our streets, and to encourage a modal shift to sustainable travel options, including walking and cycling, and electric vehicles.

The interim report of the Urban Transport-Related Air Pollution Group, which was published earlier this year, made a number of recommendations on how to reduce vehicle emissions in our towns and cities and highlights some of the actions Local Authorities can take, including traffic flow management, and changes to speed limits. In addition, the Five Cities Traffic Demand Management Study published recently by the Department of Transport proposes a range of measures to combat overreliance on cars. The report also includes a toolkit that Local Authorities can use to help them to reduce emissions, tackle congestion, and improve air quality as well as the overall urban environment in our five major cities.

Further actions to reduce transport-related air pollutant emissions are being developed as part of the Clean Air Strategy, and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications continues to work in conjunction with the Department of Transport on these matters.

Question No. 64 answered with Question No. 51.

Climate Change Policy

65. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when he will publish the annual transition statement for 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61470/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Annual Transition Statement (ATS), established under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, served an important function in providing an overview of climate

change mitigation and adaptation policy measures adopted to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to adapt to the effects of climate change in order to enable the achievement of the national transition objective.

The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, significantly strengthens the statutory framework for governance of the climate challenge. The new framework ensures delivery of successive Climate Action Plans and Long-term Climate Strategies, supported by a system of carbon budgeting and sectoral targets with appropriate oversight by Government, the Oireachtas and a new Climate Change Advisory Council. Under the Act, Ministers will have to give account for their performance towards sectoral targets and actions before an Oireachtas Committee each year. This replaces the previous Annual Transition Statement process.

I will shortly publish the Annual Transition Statement for 2020, which is to set out information on developments in respect of 2019, as was required under the 2015 Act before it was amended.

Question No. 66 answered with Question No. 51.

Question No. 67 answered with Question No. 57.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

68. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the State is on track to meet the carbon reduction targets set out in the Programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61413/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Climate ambition in the Programme for Government has been placed on a statutory footing through the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, which was signed into law in July of this year. The Act commits Ireland to achieve a climate neutral economy by no later than 2050, and provides for a 51% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 compared to 2018 levels.

The significantly strengthened legally binding framework under the Act with clear targets and commitments set in law, including embedding a process of carbon budgeting and sectoral emissions ceilings, will help ensure that Ireland achieves its climate goals and obligations in the near and long-term. Establishing these requirements in legislation places a clear obligation on this and future governments for sustained climate action.

At EU level, the EU Effort Sharing Regulation (ESR) sets binding emission reduction targets for Member States for the period 2021-2030. The current target for Ireland is a 30% reduction in emissions by 2030 compared to 2005 levels. The Climate Action Plan 2019 set out the policies and measures that Ireland must take to meet this target and avoid any costs arising from not meeting the target. Our EU target is expected to increase through the European Commission's 'Fit for 55' package.

The recently published Climate Action Plan 2021 sets out the practical measures that we need to take to meet a higher-level ambition of reducing our emissions by 51% versus 2018 levels. The plan provides a detailed roadmap for meeting our climate ambition under the Act and sets out indicative ranges of emissions reductions for each sector of the economy. These ranges will become specific ceilings in the Climate Action Plan 2022, following the legal adoption of carbon budgets and sectoral emissions ceilings.

Monitoring of compliance with national and sectoral progress towards each carbon budget and sectoral emissions ceiling will be informed by the Environmental Protection Agency's annual inventory and projection reports. To ensure greater scrutiny and accountability is provided, relevant Ministers will be required to give account to an Oireachtas Committee on progress in implementing the Climate Action Plan and adhering to the sector's emission ceiling for the associated carbon budget period.

North-South Interconnector

69. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will commission a full independent analysis of the feasibility and costs of developing the north-south interconnector via undergrounding technology. [61475/21]

117. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when the announced review of the north-south interconnector will be completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61151/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 69 and 117 together.

The North-South Interconnector is critical to improving the efficient operation of the all-island Integrated Single Electricity Market and increasing security of electricity supply in Ireland and Northern Ireland. It will also facilitate the achievement of the goal to generate up to 80% of our electricity from renewable sources by 2030. A resilient and well-connected energy infrastructure is vital for Ireland's economic well-being and the ability to respond to the future needs of energy consumers.

The option of undergrounding the North-South Interconnector has been comprehensively assessed on several occasions. Most recently, the key finding from the International Expert Commission's report of October 2018 was that an overhead line remains the most appropriate option for this critical electricity infrastructure.

Notwithstanding this, I decided to commission a further short review to assess if the overall finding from the 2018 report remains valid. The terms of reference for this study were published on my Department's website on 21 April. On 7 May, my Department initiated a procurement process to appoint an independent expert to undertake the review. International consultants were subsequently engaged and their work is well advanced at this stage. I expect the review will be completed shortly.

National Broadband Plan

70. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the implementation of the National Broadband Plan in an area (details supplied). [61428/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): There are over 276,000 premises in County Cork of which over 80,000 are within the National Broadband Plan Intervention Area and will receive access to high speed broadband under the State led intervention to be delivered by National Broadband Ireland. Government investment in County Cork in the NBP will be in the order of €314 million.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland that, some 30,728 premises in County Cork have been now surveyed. In total, over 282,000 premises in the Intervention Area across all counties have been surveyed or have surveys underway, with almost 150,000 premises under construction or complete. NBI has also advised that the first premises are connected in Cavan, Cork, Galway, Limerick and Monaghan and almost 35,000 premises are available to order and pre-order across 12 counties as of 3 December. This includes over 4,500 premises in County Cork.

Surveys are complete in County Cork in the Deployment Areas of Templemartin and Tallow. Surveying is underway in the Deployment Areas of Kanturk and Fermoy. Main build works are currently underway in the Deployment Areas of Midleton and Youghal and are complete in Carrigaline. I am advised that premises will be available for connection in the Midleton Deployment Area in the first half of 2022. This covers the areas of North Esk, Rougrane and Carbeytown.

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

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. As of 3 December, 424 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible sites and the Department of Education for school BCPs. BCPs are installed in County Cork at Ballydaly Community Hall, Aubane Community Centre, Castletownkenneigh Community Centre, Mealagh Valley Community Centre, Lissavard Community Centre, Riverstick Community Centre, Bere Island Heritage Centre, Sherkin Island Community Hall, Coláiste Phobal Cléire, Whitechurch Community Centre, Clogagh Community Hall, Laharn Heritage Centre, Castlelyons Community Centre, Glash Community Centre, T.O. Park Labbamollaga, Ionadh Áise, The Old Schoolhouse, Inch Community Centre, Ballindangan Community Centre, Courtbrack Community Centre and Aghabullogue Community Centre. Further details can be found at nbi.ie/bcp-locations/.

Ballycroneen Naional School, Clogagh National School, Scoil Naisiunta Bhiorainn, Scoil Naisiunta Padraig Naofa, Templebrady National School, Shanbally National School, Ballygarvan National School, Scoil Naisiunta Fionan Na Reanna, Ringaskiddy Lower Harbour National School, Educate Together Carrigaline, Ballyheeda National School and Druimne National School have been installed by NBI for educational access. My Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise schools with no high speed broadband, within the Intervention Area, for connection over the term of the NBP. In this regard, an acceleration of this aspect of the National Broadband Plan has been announced which will see some 679 primary schools connected to high speed broadband by 2022, well ahead of the original target delivery timeframe of 2026. Further details are available on the NBI website at nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/.

National Broadband Plan

71. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of premises connected in County Mayo as part of the National Broadband Plan; the efforts being undertaken to ramp-up the speed of the roll-out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61492/21]

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 some 679 schools.

Despite the unprecedented challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, National Broadband Ireland has made steady progress on delivery of the new high speed fibre broadband network under the National Broadband Plan with over 282,000 premises surveyed or with survey underway across all counties and almost 150,000 premises with build currently underway or complete. Almost 35,000 premises are available to order and pre-order across 12 counties as of 3 December. I am advised by NBI that, over 10,000 premises in County Mayo have been now surveyed. Surveys are complete in the Deployment Areas of Newport, Killadoon, and Carrowmorelacken. Surveys are ongoing in the Deployment area of Liscarney. I am further advised that pre build works are on going in the Deployment Areas of Castlebar and Athlone (in which over 2,100 premises are in County Mayo) with anticipated dates for connection in H1 and H2 of 2022 respectively.

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

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. My 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.

It remains the ambition of the Government to rollout the National Broadband Plan as quickly as possible. My Department continues to engage with NBI to explore the feasibility of accelerating aspects of the NBP rollout to establish the possibility of bringing forward premises which are currently scheduled in years 6 and 7 of the current plan to an earlier date. However, the primary focus must be on addressing the delays which have arisen and ensuring that the National Broadband Ireland build programme gets back on track and is building momentum month on month.

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. As of 3 December 2021, 424 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible sites and the Department of Education for school BCPs. BCPs are installed in County Mayo at Clare Island Community Centre, Finny Community Centre, Islandeady Community Centre, Taugheen Community Centre, Bofeenaun Community Centre, Clogher Community Centre, Ardagh Community Centre, Cushlough Community Centre, Belderrig Community & Research Centre, Kilmovee Community Centre, Keel Community Centre, Killaser Community Centre, The Black Tom Freeman Sport and Community Amenities Centre and Clg Béal An Mhuirthead. Further details can be found at nbi.ie/bcp-locations/.

Scoil Néifinn, Midfield National School, Meelick More National School, Kinaffe National School, Gortskehy National School, Facefield National School, Errew National School, Cloghans National School, Shraigh National School, Rathbane National School, Rathnamagh National School, Dooagh National School, Valley National School, Dookinella National School, Roxboro National School, Cloonliffen National School, Tavraun Central National School and Saint Coleman's National School have been installed by NBI for educational access. My Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise schools with no high speed broadband, within the Intervention Area, for connection over the term of the NBP. In this regard, an acceleration of this aspect of the National Broadband Plan was announced late last year which will see some 679 primary schools connected to high speed broadband by 2022, well ahead of the original target delivery timeframe of 2026. Further details are available on the NBI website at nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/.

Illegal Dumping

72. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the actions being undertaken by his Department to address the scourge of illegal dumping. [61429/21]

84. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the initiatives that his Department has delivered in order to tackle rubbish, illegal dumping and fly-tipping; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61519/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 72 and 84 together.

The annual Anti-Dumping Initiative (ADI) was introduced in 2017 to encourage a collaborative approach between local authorities, communities, and other State Agencies to tackling the problem of illegal dumping. Delivery of the ADI is co-ordinated by the three Waste Enforcement Regional Lead Authorities (WERLAs) and supported projects are selected based on their impact on four key criteria - prevention, abatement, enforcement, and awareness. Since its introduction, funding of over €9 million has been provided by my Department under the Initiative, which has supported the delivery of over 1,000 projects across all 31 local authorities. Full details of funding, broken down by local authority and individual project, for each of the years 2017-2020 are available on the gov.ie website at the following link:

www.gov.ie/en/publication/e27ac-anti-dumping-initiative/

A further €3m has been allocated to local authorities under the 2021 ADI. Payments are

currently being processed and details will be made available on the gov.ie website when the process is complete. Allocations under the ADI for 2022 have yet to be finalised, but it is likely that a similar amount will be made available to local authorities in 2022 under the Initiative.

My Department also continues to invest significantly in the local authority waste enforcement network under the Local Authority Waste Enforcement Measures Grant Scheme, with the intention of maintaining a visible presence of waste enforcement personnel on the ground across the State. Over €7.7m was provided to local authorities under the scheme in 2021, in order to support the recruitment and retention of over 150 local authority waste enforcement staff across the country.

Question No. 73 answered with Question No. 50.

National Broadband Plan

74. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when the National Broadband Plan will be rolled out across County Donegal by townland and yearly quarter; the number of premises connected under the plan to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61503/21]

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 some 679 schools. The NBP roll out is currently a 7 year plan under the contract and deployment is due to be complete by the end of 2026.

There are over 32,000 premises in the Intervention Area in County Donegal that will receive access to high speed broadband under the NBP and Government investment in Donegal under the NBP will be in the order of €128 million. I am advised by NBI that, some 14,151 premises in County Donegal have now been surveyed. Surveys are complete in County Donegal in the Deployment Areas of Creeslough, Tamney, Bunbeg and St Johnston. Surveying is the first step towards delivering the new fibre network and informs design solutions for provision of the fibre network. I am further advised that pre-build works are underway in the Deployment Area of Letterkenny with anticipated dates for connection in H2 of 2022. Given the nature of the build and ongoing work to address the impact of Covid-19 related delays, it is not possible to give specific details on a per townland and quarter year basis out to 2026.

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

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. My 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.

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. As of 3 December, 424 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible sites and the Department of Education for school BCPs. BCPs are connected at Dunree Military Museum, Ray Community Centre, Glenveagh National Park, Cranford Coole Community Centre, Rathlin Knitwear, The Gweedore Theatre, Leghowney Community Centre, Sliabh Liag Ranger Station, Tory Co-Op, Malin Head and Meenreagh Hostel. Further details can be found at nbi.ie/bcp-locations/.

Doaghbeg National School, Scoil Naoimh Colum, Drumfad National School, Scoil Naomh Cholmcille and Urbalreagh National School have been installed by NBI for educational access. My Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise schools with no high speed broadband, within the Intervention Area, for connection over the term of the NBP. In this regard, an acceleration of this aspect of the National Broadband Plan was announced in December which will see some 679 primary schools connected to high speed broadband by 2022, well ahead of the original target delivery timeframe of 2026. Further details are available on the NBI website at nbi.ie/primary-schools-list.

Climate Action Plan

75. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the amount in the Climate Action Fund; if the recently announced reduction in the National Oil Reserves Agency levy will reduce projected revenues raised for the Fund; if so, the extent to which; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61421/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The recently published Climate Action Plan 2021 commits to incrementally raising the proportion of biofuels blended into petrol and diesel between now and 2030. I recently announced that the next increase in the rate of supply of biofuels blended in diesel and petrol will take effect from 1 January 2022.

Interim measures are to be put in place to help with any fuel price impact caused by this increase, and having regard to the impacts of the recent global increases in energy and fuel prices. These measures will involve a combination of a 1 cent per litre reduction in the National Oil Reserves Agency's (NORA) levy and a 1 cent per litre reduction in excise.

The change to the NORA levy is expected to result in reduced revenues into the Climate Action Fund in the range of €30 to €35 million in 2022. The current balance in the Climate Action Fund is just over €49 million.

Departmental Strategies

76. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the current status of Ireland's first clean air strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61144/21]

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

These regulations will be finalised in the coming months to be in place for the 2022/23 heating season and will be a central element of the Strategy which will also identify and promote the integrated actions across Government required to reduce air pollution. I intend to open the public consultation on the Strategy in the near future.

Waste Management

77. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the way his Department will support persons with long-term incontinence with respect to the disposal of medical incontinence wear; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61536/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I refer to the reply to Question No 60 of 9 September 2021. The position is unchanged.

Electricity Generation

78. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will provide a progress update on the implementation of a new microgeneration scheme to enable selling of electricity back to the grid by domestic, public and private producers including farms; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61342/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The pending introduction of a Clean Export Guarantee (CEG) tariff represents the first phase of a comprehensive enabling framework for micro-and small-scale generators in Ireland. This will allow all renewables self-consumers to receive remuneration from their electricity supplier for all excess renewable electricity exported to the grid, reflective of the market value of that electricity.

Following a public consultation, the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) published a decision on an interim enabling framework for the CEG on 1 December last. This decision, inter alia, outlines eligibility criteria and remuneration methodology. The CRU has decided that suppliers will set their individual CEG tariffs on a competitive market basis. The CRU decision also includes a number of provisions to ensure that the implementation of the CEG aligns with the National Smart Metering Programme. The CEG will become available upon the transposition of Article 21 of RED II into Irish law, which is expected to be complete before the end of the year, and will be available to both new and existing micro- and small-scale generators who fulfil the eligibility criteria as determined by the CRU.

My Department is also developing the final scheme design for the Micro-generation Support Scheme (MSS). It is expected that a proposal on the supports to be offered to citizens, farms, businesses and other entities for new installations under the Scheme will be submitted to Government shortly. Following Government approval, it is expected that the scheme design will be published in early 2022 and supports will be introduced on a phased basis over the course of the year.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

79. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress to date in achieving emission reduction targets in line with the Programme for Government whilst at the same time protecting economic progress in the agri-food business or other sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61426/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Climate ambition in the Programme for Government has been placed on a statutory footing through the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, which was signed into law in July of this year. The Act commits Ireland to achieve a climate neutral economy by no later than 2050, and provides for a 51% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 compared to 2018 levels.

The significantly strengthened legally binding framework under the Act with clear targets and commitments set in law, including embedding a process of carbon budgeting and sectoral emissions ceilings, will help ensure that Ireland achieves its climate goals and obligations in the near and long-term. Establishing these requirements in legislation places a clear obligation on this and future governments for sustained climate action.

In order to deliver upon this ambition, the Government published Climate Action Plan 2021 in November 2021, which identifies the actions necessary to achieve our emissions reductions targets. The Plan sets out indicative ranges of emissions reductions for each sector of the economy based on their respective starting points, and the relative difficulty, cost, speed, and benefits, of reducing emissions. All sectors, including agriculture will reduce emissions by an ambitious and achievable percentage, each playing a vital role in meeting our targets.

The plan builds on the significant progress made since CAP 2019, in particular in the areas of climate governance, renewable electricity, ensuring a just transition, the development of a National Residential Retrofit Plan and the increasing levels of bio-fuels in the transport sector. The National Development Plan has allocated significantly increased funding to climate action, including public transport and retrofitting over the next decade.

With regard to the agriculture sector, the core measures outlined in the Climate Action Plan 2021 include efficiencies across the agriculture sector and diversification measures, including increasing organic production and the production of biomethane. Further measures will be required to meet the targets set for this sector and include the introduction of a model for carbon farming, exploring feed-related methane reduction solutions, and conducting a diversification review which will include an assessment on the wider production of biomethane. The Government is committed to finding the balance between environmental, climate and biodiversity needs, and supports for farmers.

Failure to rapidly decarbonise our economic model will have far reaching negative impacts on the economy and the public finances; undermine the long-term, sustainable competitiveness of the economy; and lock Ireland into a redundant fossil-fuel based economic model. Embrac-

ing the transition will support further job creation through the development of new and emerging sectors.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

80. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the measures he will take to ensure that the targets set to be missed as documented in the Climate Change Advisory Council's review of the year will be met in particular the lack of a long term emissions reduction strategy, a failure to meet the target of a 20% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions for 2020 and the delayed measures for transport and heating in the Climate Action plan 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61469/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I welcome the publication of the Climate Change Advisory Council's 2021 Annual Report. The report highlights that a significant ramp-up of mitigation effort is required across the agriculture, land-use, built environment and transport sectors. It also emphasises the importance of climate resilience, while also recognising the significant progress already made in decarbonising our electricity system. Additionally, it stresses that the transition will have a cost and preparations will be required to reduce the impact on the most vulnerable.

We have delivered key elements of our climate policy framework in the last year, including the milestone Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, and the Climate Action Plan 2021 which identifies the policies,measures and actions necessary to achieve emissions reductions of 51% by 2030 and net zero emissions by no later than 2050.The Government will shortly publish an Annex of Actions, which will set out the detailed steps that must be taken to deliver on our climate commitments. We will shortly have in place a system of legally binding economy-wide carbon budgets and sectoral emissions ceilings, with relevant Ministers required to give account to the Oireachtas on performance on implementing the Climate Action Plan and adhering to the sector's emission ceiling for the carbon budget period.

The National Development Plan published in October allocated significantly increased funding to climate action, including public transport and retrofitting over the next decade.

The National Dialogue on Climate Action will create a comprehensive support structure for widespread public and stakeholder engagement on climate change, empowering people across all areas of society and the economy to adopt more sustainable behaviours, and participate in all aspects of the transition.

Following the enactment of the Climate Act in July, and the publication of the Climate Action Plan 2021 in November, we will in the coming period finalise Ireland's Long-term Strategy to reflect this increased ambition.. The Strategy will be brought to Government for consideration and approval, ahead of being submitted to the European Commission.

National Broadband Plan

81. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the role of advisers (details supplied) in the ownership structure of National Broadband Ireland and its role in the National Broadband Plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61548/21]

82. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Com-

munications the ownership structure of National Broadband Ireland and a company (details supplied) respectively with regard to the National Broadband Plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61538/21]

123. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the safeguards that are in place in respect of the National Broadband Plan to protect the State from liability and or risk posed by the make-up and investor entities in National Broadband Ireland. [61370/21]

125. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps National Broadband Ireland must take in advance of the inclusion of new investors or excluding investor entities in its corporate structure; and if he can veto changes to the corporate structure. [61372/21]

144. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if his attention and or that of his officials was drawn to the involvement of a company (details supplied) in the context of it being an entity owned by another company; and if he will clarify the role of the company in the National Broadband Plan; the date on which the matter was notified to him; and the steps he took on receiving notice. [61578/21]

145. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he is satisfied that no change in ownership or amendments to same have been made in respect of the ownership structure of National Broadband Ireland since its formation. [61579/21]

173. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if clarity will be provided on the National Broadband Plan including investors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61977/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): I propose to take Questions Nos. 81, 82, 123, 125, 144, 145 and 173 together.

The contract for the National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led intervention, which was signed with National Broadband Ireland (NBI) in November 2019, is a comprehensive and detailed document. To protect the State investment and ensure that the NBP milestones and deliverables are met, the contract has been designed to include extensive protections, quality checks, reporting and monitoring obligations.

On the matter of ownership, Metallah Limited is the 100% owner of the shares in the capital of NBI - save for the special share of the Minister which does not provide ownership rights. Granahan McCourt Dublin Limited is the 100% owner of the shares in the capital of Metallah Limited and is owned 50.9% by Granahan McCourt Fund Limited (a David McCourt controlled company) and 49.1% by Tel-IE Broadband Sari, an entity managed and controlled by Oak Hill Advisors. The ownership structure remains as it was at contract signing and contract effective date.

The NBP Contract provides specific protections in relation to a change in ownership, sale, or change in control of shareholders of NBI. Under the Contract, and up until 12 months after the network build is complete, the prior approval of the Minister is required for any of these events. In the event of a sale of NBI, any new owners will continue to have the same obligations as the original owners.

The Contract also requires the written consent of the Minister prior to the transfer of any interest, direct or indirect, in NBI held by Mr David McCourt . Again, this requirement is in place

until 12 months after the network build is complete. It should be noted, however, that approval under these provisions cannot be unreasonably withheld.

In the event that the investors sell the majority of their shareholding in NBI in the first ten years of the Contract, the State will be entitled to clawback a proportion of any profit on sale based on the value of the business at the time of sale.

Question No. 82 answered with Question No. 81.

National Broadband Plan

83. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the funding and equity committed to National Broadband Ireland and the National Broadband Plan by its investors; the corresponding funding and equity committed to the National Broadband Plan by the State to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61504/21]

91. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the funds withdrawn or recouped from National Broadband Ireland – National Broadband Plan; and the resulting impact this may have on roll-out targets. [61474/21]

134. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the breakdown of the €2.7 billion investment contained within the National Development Plan to deliver on the National Broadband Plan through National Broadband Ireland including the financial years that this investment corresponds. [61531/21]

141. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps he and or his predecessor have taken to ensure that equity has been lodged and accounted for from the contract winner in the context of the National Broadband Plan; if he will provide a schedule of the equity received; the amount the State has provided to date; and the amount provided by the contract holder in working capital [61575/21]

143. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the identity of the majority shareholder in the National Broadband Ireland; the amount the consortium of investors has contributed to date; and the amount recouped. [61577/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): I propose to take Questions Nos. 83, 91, 134, 141 and 143 together.

The contract for the National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led intervention, which was signed with National Broadband Ireland (NBI) in November 2019, is a comprehensive and detailed document. To protect the State investment and ensure that the NBP milestones and deliverables are met, the contract has been designed to include extensive protections, quality checks, reporting and monitoring obligations.

Of the €2.7 billion capped maximum exchequer subsidy committed to the National Broadband Plan, €2.1 billion relates to base subsidy, €0.48 billion is for contingencies and over €0.1 billion refers to VAT. This subsidy has been committed over a 25 year period. Total funds of €223m, including working capital, have been committed by the consortium to the NBP in accordance with the requirements of the contract.

The investors are providing funding through the purchase of shares in NBI and the provision of shareholder loans. I am advised that utilising both instruments is a standard form of investment in infrastructure companies and reference to both as being "equity investments" is common practice.

The initial drawdown of committed shareholder funds by NBI was €100 million in January 2020. This was drawn down before the release of any subsidy by the State. I am advised that no shareholder distributions have been made to date. I am also advised that a further drawdown of investor funds of €20m will be made in the coming weeks and that the full amount of committed equity of €175m is covered by guarantees.

As of November 2021, €167.8m of subsidy had been claimed by NBI which equates to approximately 6% of the maximum State Subsidy. At that same point, 45% of investor funds had been drawn down.

I am advised that the level of funding committed and the manner in which it has been committed is in accordance with the contract.

On the matter of ownership, Metallah Limited is the 100% owner of the shares in the capital of NBI - save for the special share of the Minister which does not provide ownership rights. Granahan McCourt Dublin Limited is the 100% owner of the shares in the capital of Metallah Limited and is owned 50.9% by Granahan McCourt Fund Limited (a David McCourt controlled company) and 49.1% by Tel-IE Broadband Sari, an entity managed and controlled by Oak Hill Advisors. The ownership structure remains as it was at contract signing and contract effective date.

Question No. 84 answered with Question No. 72.

Illegal Dumping

85. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if his Department has had discussions with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in relation to staffing to tackle litter; if local authorities have adequate resources to tackle fly-tipping and illegal dumping; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61518/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): The Litter Pollution Act and the Waste Management Act provide the statutory framework to combat littering and illegal dumping respectively. Under the Acts, the primary responsibility for litter, waste management and enforcement activity lies with the Local Authorities and the Office of Environmental Enforcement within the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

It is a matter for each Local Authority to determine the most appropriate course of action to tackle litter pollution and illegal dumping locally within the legislation provided. This includes determining the most appropriate staffing, public awareness, enforcement, infrastructure provision and clean-up arrangements in relation to litter and waste, taking account of local circumstances and priorities.

My Department continues to invest significantly in the local authority waste enforcement network under the Local Authority Waste Enforcement Measures Grant Scheme, with the intention of maintaining a visible presence of waste enforcement personnel on the ground across the State. Over €7.7m was provided to local authorities under the scheme in 2021, in order to

support the recruitment and retention of over 150 local authority waste enforcement staff across the country. My Department also continues to support the ongoing enhancement of the role, capacity and responsibilities of the Waste Enforcement Regional Lead Authorities, in order to position the local authority sector to better respond to emerging and priority enforcement challenges. I am satisfied that local authorities have the necessary resources in place to continue to effectively tackle fly-tipping and illegal dumping.

Energy Policy

86. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the impact that building up to seven new gas power stations will have on Ireland's ability to meet climate action targets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61343/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Government's Policy Statement on Security of Electricity Supply, published at the end of last month, sets out that the development of new conventional generation, including gas-fired generation, is a national priority and should be permitted and supported in order to ensure security of electricity supply and support the achievement of higher levels of renewable electricity generation.

The policy statement supports the need to deliver circa 2 GW of new gas-fired generation which is set out in the National Development Plan 2021-2030 and the Climate Action Plan 2021.

The need for this level of new gas-fired generation capacity was identified by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, which has statutory responsibility for security of electricity supply, and EirGrid.

As set out in EirGrid's Generation Capacity Statement, which was published in September, much of this new capacity is needed to replace older high-emitting power stations such as those fuelled by oil and coal. It is also needed to meet growing demand from large energy users, such as data centres, and the electrification of the heat and transport sectors.

It is important to note that the development of flexible gas-fired generation is to provide security of supply and support increased levels of renewable electricity generation. The new capacity will only run when needed and therefore minimise the level of associated emissions.

Question No. 87 answered with Question No. 60.

Electricity Grid

88. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the development of the Celtic Interconnector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61491/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Celtic Interconnector is an electricity interconnector jointly proposed by EirGrid and the French Transmission System Operator, RTÉ (Réseau de Transport d'Électricité). It is proposed as a 575km long, with 500km of this being subsea, 700MW cable connecting the north-west coast of France to the south coast of Ireland. At this scale it would be able to provide electricity for some 450,000 homes.

The Celtic Interconnector will provide a reliable high-capacity electricity link between Ireland and France that will have significant benefits for electricity consumers in Ireland. The project will provide access to the European internal energy market, leading to expected increased competition and lower prices in Ireland. It will also enhance security of electricity supply and facilitate increased capacity for renewable energy here via export access to the mainland European markets.

In late 2019, the European Commission announced a grant of €530 million towards the construction of the interconnector under the Connecting Europe Facility fund. Following extensive planning and multiple periods of public consultation over the past number of years, EirGrid decided earlier this year on the interconnector's route in East Cork. EirGrid have further decided to establish an enhanced community benefit scheme for neighbouring communities. EirGrid will continue to engage with the public on this project in the coming months and years.

While I have no function in the area of consenting for the interconnector, I understand from EirGrid that applications to all relevant consenting authorities are now submitted. Statutory public consultations with regard to the planning and foreshore licence applications have been held in recent months.

Question No. 89 answered with Question No. 51.

National Broadband Plan

90. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the engagement he has had with National Broadband Ireland and other relevant stakeholders to ensure that current delays to the roll-out will be resolved; the measures being considered to improve on the current projected delivery dates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61452/21]

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 some 679 schools. My Department as the contracting authority manages all of the elements of contract governance and engages with NBI on an ongoing basis across all elements of the programme to deliver the new high speed broadband network.

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. My 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.

NBI has implemented a number of measures to help lessen the impact that these challenges have had on the rollout including:-

- Increasing the rate of pole replacement and duct remediation per month;

- Bringing in additional NBI resources;
- Earlier procurement of material used in the build stages; and
- Bringing in additional subcontractors.

National Broadband Ireland has made steady progress on delivery of the new high speed fibre broadband network under the National Broadband Plan with almost 35,000 premises available to order and pre-order in 13 counties across Carlow, Cavan, Clare, Cork, Galway, Kerry, Limerick, Louth, Monaghan, Roscommon, Tipperary, Wexford and Wicklow. In total, over 282,000 premises in the Intervention Area across all counties have been surveyed, with over 150,000 premises under construction or complete with activity now underway in all 26 counties.

While delivery of the Programme is the responsibility of NBI under the Contract, my Department continues to monitor delivery very closely in accordance with the Department's role under the contract. In parallel with the ongoing oversight of the contract with NBI, the Department has also been working with the 31 Local Authorities, the County and City Management Agency (CCMA), the Roads Maintenance Office (RMO), Broadband Officers and other Government Departments, where appropriate, to ensure that any possible barriers that might delay the rollout are addressed as soon as possible. This also includes engagement with other bodies such as Transport Infrastructure Ireland, Irish Rail and ComReg.

Question No. 91 answered with Question No. 83.

Illegal Dumping

92. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if local authorities will receive support in 2021 and 2022 to help fund anti-dumping initiatives particularly regarding the Dublin mountains; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61262/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Anti-Dumping Initiative (ADI) was introduced in 2017 to encourage a collaborative approach between local authorities, communities, and other State Agencies to tackling the problem of illegal dumping. Funding of over €9 million has been provided by my Department under the Initiative, which has supported the delivery of over 1,000 projects nationwide. Details of funding, broken down by local authority and individual project, for each of the years 2017-2020 are available on the gov.ie website at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/publication/e27ac-anti-dumping-initiative/

€3m has been allocated to local authorities under the 2021 ADI. Payments to each local authority are currently being finalised and details will be made available on the gov.ie website when complete. Allocations for 2022 have yet to be finalised, but it is likely that a similar amount will be made available in 2022.

As regards the Dublin mountains, my Department continue to provide support to the Protecting Uplands and Rural Environments (PURE) project, which was established in 2006 to combat illegal dumping and fly-tipping in the Wicklow/Dublin Uplands. PURE is a partnership project incorporating statutory and non-statutory organisations, including Wicklow, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown and South Dublin County Councils, Coillte, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, and the Wicklow Uplands Council..

€115,000 has been allocated in support of the PURE Project in 2021 and my Department has committed to maintaining this figure for at least a further two years to end 2023. My Department has also separately approved an allocation of up to €150,000 in 2021 to enable the purchase of a PURE Project truck. This purchase will help to provide greater certainty for the operational work of the Project in the coming years.

Wind Energy Generation

93. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps he will take to ensure citizen engagement with offshore wind energy projects in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61411/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Government considers citizen engagement to be at the heart of Ireland's energy and climate transformation. It is critically important that citizens and local communities are recognised as best placed to understand their own needs and concerns, as well as enabled to effectively participate in implementing the changes required. Local communities will be central to the decision-making processes of community engagement initiatives as part of Ireland's offshore renewable energy journey.

The Maritime Area Planning (MAP) Bill, which has been passed by Dáil Éireann and is currently before Seanad Éireann, will enable the realisation of our offshore renewable energy ambition by establishing a well-regulated and inclusive consenting process, with comprehensive environmental assessments and consultative processes to better enable meaningful community engagement.

My Department has also just completed a public consultation on the draft terms and conditions for the first offshore wind auction under the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme, ORESS 1, which will support the first phase of offshore wind development in Ireland. Projects successful at this auction will be required to make significant community benefit contributions from an early stage in the lifecycle of an offshore wind project. There has been a tremendous response from local communities to this consultation and my Department will now carefully consider all submissions before issuing a formal response early next year. I look forward to working harmoniously with local communities and the offshore renewable energy industry to make this happen together in a way that is successful for everyone involved.

Question No. 94 answered with Question No. 51.

Question No. 95 answered with Question No. 1.

Departmental Expenditure

96. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Taoiseach further to Parliamentary Question No. 113 of 7 December 2021, if he will provide an additional schedule that sets out all energy costs associated with ICT hardware in his Department, that is, servers and so on in tabular form. [60948/21]

The Taoiseach: Electricity usage in the Government Buildings complex, which includes the Department of the Taoiseach, is administered by the Houses of the Oireachtas. There is no further breakdown of electricity costs provided for the specific usage areas requested by the Deputy beyond the total electricity costs paid by the Department which was provided to the

Deputy in answer to the question last week.

Covid-19 Pandemic

97. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Taoiseach the amount his Department spent on Covid-19-related advertising in the period from 1 January 2020 to 30 November 2021. [60986/21]

The Taoiseach: Attached is a tabular breakdown of the covid-related advertising spend from 1 January 2020 to 30 November 2021.

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

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

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

Campaigns have included Radio, newspaper and social elements.

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

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

Campaign name:	Total
Emergency Business Supports	€512,427
Use of Outdoor/Public Spaces	€408,262
14 Day Restrictions	€466,717
Community Call	€1,774,625
Business Supports - SMEs	€1,018,966
Wellbeing	€836,841
Reopening Roadmap	€850,618
Business Reopening - Return to Work Safely Protocol	€868,180
Leaving Certificate	€58,436
Phase 1 Reopening	€1,176,758

Campaign name:	Total
Business Reopening - RTW 2	€600,942
Phase 2 Reopening	€892,545
Phase 3 Reopening	€1,205,814
Personal Responsibility	€384,388
Travel	€323,353
Phase 4 Reopening - July Delay	€735,731
July Jobs Stimulus	€652,373
Travel Green List	€175,911
Phase 4 Reopening - August Delay	€171,364
3 Counties Restrictions (National and Regional)	€119,422
Additional National Measures (August)	€449,608
Dublin/Limerick High incidence awareness	€376,738
Living with COVID (Announcement, Framework and Household booklet)	€902,588
Dublin Level 3 (Sept)	€12,318
Donegal Level 3 (Sept)	€181,933
Reinforcing Public Health Messaging Nationwide	€123,087
Nationwide Level 3 (Oct)	€239,671
3 Counties L4 / National L3 update	€44,845
Nationwide Level 5 (Oct)	€211,717
Keep Well - Community Wellbeing	€741,343
#SafeChristmas Phase 1 (L3)	€40,160
#Antiviral	€87,120
#SafeChristmas Phase 2 (Christmas Week)	€0
#SafeChristmas Phase 3 - Live action TV ad	€157,058
#SafeChristmas Phase 3 - Animated TV ad	€36,947
3rd Party Copy/Scriptwriting/Strategy	€46,434
TOTALS 2020	€16,885,239
Reinforcing Public Health Messaging Nationwide	€726
Nationwide Level 5 (continuation in Nov 2020	€9,833
#Safe Christmas Phase 1	€843,637
#Antiviral phase 1	€76,835
#SafeChristmas P2 - (Christmas week)	€480,957
#SafeChristmas P3 - Gathering/Dinner	€384,820
Christmas transition to Level 5	€222,950
Dec/Jan return to full Level 5	€426,579
January Additional Level 5 measures	€607,975
#Antiviral maintenance campaign	€33,832
Stay at home - Do the Right Thing	€17,894
Calendar	€42,165

Campaign name:	Total
Stay the Course - Do the Right Thing	€145,540
Maintain Progress - February	€136,888
Reopening of Schools Spring 2021	€673,034
#Antiviral phase 2 - Real Stories	€98,656
How it started	€414,316
Avoid the Surge	€168,273
30th March Announcement	€839,406
Antiviral Phase 2 - Real Stories pt 2	€74,263
Stay Local for April	€152,109
Stay Local for April update	€190,115
Recovery Plan Summer - May	€1,266,481
Economic Recovery Plan	€511,792
Recovery Plan Summer - June	€927,825
Recovery Plan Summer - July	€919,917
Protect our Progress - August 2021	€9,116
Reframing the Challenge - September	€718,670
Reframing the Challenge - October	€20,796
3rd Party Copy/Scriptwriting/Strategy	€9,840
TOTAL 2021 Costs	€10,425,237
OVERALL TOTAL COST	€27,310,476

Horticulture Sector

98. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Taoiseach further to Parliamentary Question No. 133 of 30 November 2021, if peat transported from this State to Northern Ireland is included in export figures cited; and if so, the quantities of same for each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021. [61448/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): The data requested by the Deputy is set out below. Further to Parliamentary Question 133 of 30 November 2021, exports of peat to Northern Ireland are included in the data for the Rest of the World. Table A below sets out the data for Northern Ireland. The data for 2021 to date is not included in the table as some of the data relating to this product which has been received by CSO is inconsistent with previous returns received. CSO has contacted the traders involved, via the VIMA branch of the Revenue Commissioners, to ascertain the accuracy of this data. Once a reply is received from these traders, and the data is either validated or corrected, it will be available for publication.

Table A : Exports of Peat to Northern Ireland 2016 - 2020.

[Exports of peat to NI]

Covid-19 Pandemic

99. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will seek to have the TRIPS Waiver at the WTO lifted which will increase the

production of generic Covid-19 vaccines and greatly improve access to Covid-19 vaccines to persons all across the developing world. [61670/21]

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

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

The EU proposed an alternative to the TRIPS waiver that relates to the use of the flexibilities in the TRIPS Agreement. The proposal is targeted and pragmatic and aims at ensuring that governments can resort to compulsory licences, including to export to countries with no or limited manufacturing capacities, in the most effective manner adapted to the circumstances of a pandemic.

The EU is of the view that there is no single solution and that a multi-pronged approach is needed and that discussions should concentrate on how the Intellectual Property system can contribute towards increasing the manufacturing capacity and the equitable access to vaccines around the world.

Despite the postponement of the WTO Ministerial Conference, WTO members will continue to engage in a solution-oriented manner to find an outcome on how the WTO can contribute to an effective response to any pandemic, not just the current one.

Ireland will engage with the European Commission and other member states on the EU position for the WTO discussions including discussions on how the flexibilities within the TRIPS Agreement can contribute towards increasing the manufacturing capacity and the equitable access to vaccines around the world.

The global production of vaccines is increasing rapidly and it is estimated that 12 billion doses of COVID vaccines will be produced by the end of 2021. The EU considers that the COVAX Facility is the mechanism that is best placed to ensure that high-income countries finance the vaccines and support the developing countries to secure their share of global supply.

Europe has committed 200 million doses to reach low and middle-income countries by the end of this year, mainly through the COVAX initiative and is investing €1 billion to ramp up mRNA production capacity in Africa.

Ireland has contributed €7 million in funding to COVAX in 2021 and will donate 1.3 million vaccines this year to low-income countries as part of the COVAX programme. The first 500,000 Irish doses donated through the facility reached Nigeria on the 29th of November with further donations of Irish vaccines taking place in the coming weeks. In addition, Ireland has delivered on its commitment to donate 335,000 COVID-19 doses to Uganda.

Work Permits

100. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment when a work permit will issue in the case of a person (details supplied) whose approval is urgent given the timeframe for their required skills for their employment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61120/21]

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 General Employment Permit application in respect of the individual (details supplied) was received on 30th November 2021.

Applications for employment permits are dealt with in date order. Employment Permits Section are currently processing standard applications received on 17th August 2021.

Applicants can keep track of current processing dates for Employment Permit applications 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 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.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

101. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the action his Department is taking to help businesses decarbonise and prepare for a greener future in particular for smaller and medium enterprises; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61143/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment is actively assisting enterprises in preparing for a greener future. We are integrating climate action into all aspects of the Department and its agencies' activities and assisting enterprises in doing so too.

The Department is facilitating a drive toward the green economy through its agencies. Earlier this year, Enterprise Ireland launched a Climate Enterprise Action Fund to assist Irish companies to build the capabilities required to deliver sustainable products, services and business models.

Enterprise Ireland's forthcoming Strategy for the next four years will set out actions to embed sustainability and climate action as a fundamental part of its approach to company development and engagement with their clients.

The Local Enterprise offices run the "Green for Micro" programme on a national scale. The programme is designed to provide small businesses with tailored expert advice on how to drive sustainability. Qualifying businesses can access two days of intensive mentoring including a sustainability audit and action plan, designed to help "green" their operations.

The Department and the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications recently launched the Climate Toolkit 4 Business. The Climate Toolkit 4 Business allows SMEs to input some simple information and get an estimate of their carbon footprint and a personalised action plan to reduce it. Each tailored action plan will include straight-forward practical instructions and highlights the relevant help that is available from Government, through agencies such as Enterprise Ireland, the Local Enterprise Offices and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland. The Toolkit will be particularly useful for SME and Micro enterprises at the beginning of their decarbonisation journey.

Ensuring all enterprises have the assistance they require to decarbonise is essential to maintaining resilience and competitiveness, particularly as consumer preferences change over time. My Department, in conjunction with its agencies, will ensure all enterprises have the opportunity to continue to grow while making the green transition.

Departmental Consultations

102. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the status of the consultation with retired workers' organisations in relation to the Industrial Relations (Provisions in Respect of Pension Entitlements of Retired Workers) Bill 2021; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that to date retired workers have been excluded from the process of engagement between sponsoring employers of occupational pension schemes and trade unions when changes to a scheme are proposed even when retired workers will be adversely affected by those changes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61228/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): The Government has agreed to a timed amendment to the Industrial Relations (Provisions in Respect of Pension Entitlements of Retired Workers) Bill 2021.

This will allow time, as has been outlined on the floor of the Dáil, to examine the issues carefully and to ensure that all stakeholders are consulted.

A consultation process will commence as soon as possible and will involve engagement with organisations representing retired workers.

Job Losses

103. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his attention or that of his officials has been drawn to formal notice of redundancies and or employment termination at a hotel (details supplied) in County Kildare; if so, the date the notice to his Department was received; the maximum time period permitted from the notice of redundancy to payment of statutory and enhanced packages to be paid; and if his attention has been further drawn to the situation in which staff surrendered State income support based on formal notice issuing to them. [61246/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): The Protection of Employment Act 1977 imposes a number of obligations on employers who are proposing collective redundancies, including an obligation under section 9 and 10 to engage in an information and consultation process with employees' representatives and to provide certain information relating to the proposed redundancies. Section 11A of the Act provides that, where an employee believes the employer to be in breach of sections 9 or 10, they may pursue a complaint to the Workplace Relations Commission. It is also an offence under section 11 of the Act where an employer fails to comply with sections 9 or 10.

There is also an obligation under section 12 which makes it mandatory on employers proposing a collective redundancy to notify the Tánaiste, as the Minister for Enterprise Trade and Employment, of the proposed collective redundancy. An employer is prohibited from issuing any notice of redundancy during the mandatory employee information and consultation period (required by the l977 Act) and until 30 days have elapsed from the date on which the Tánaiste has been notified. I can confirm that the notification regarding proposed collective redundancies

at Celbridge Manor Hotel (Clann Hospitality) was received in the Tánaiste's office on the 11th of October.

The Redundancy Payments Act 1967 places a legal obligation on employers to give notice of redundancy and make a statutory redundancy lump sum payment to an eligible employee. However, the Social Insurance Fund provides a safety net for employees in situations where the employer cannot pay due to financial difficulties or insolvency. Negotiations on enhanced redundancy are a voluntary matter between the employer and former employees.

If an employer has failed to pay redundancy entitlements they can refer a complaint to the Workplace Relations Commission for an adjudication and redress where appropriate.

I understand that issues have arisen in relation to the employees' Pandemic Unemployment Payments (PUP). This matter is appropriate to my colleague Heather Humphreys, Minister for Social Protection.

Work Permits

104. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will grant a work permit extension to workers who are temporarily laid off due to Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61254/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): In March 2020, an Employment Permit COVID 19 Contingency Plan was implemented, with the Employment Permit Section moving seamlessly to a totally remote working environment. Conscious of the impact of COVID 19 on enterprises, my officials have endeavoured to be as flexible as possible within the legislative framework of the employment permit system. The feedback received from enterprise across the board has been universally positive, in fact Ireland was one of the few countries that has managed to keep the employment permit system fully operational throughout the crisis.

In the period of February 2021, in response to COVID 19 concerns, my colleague the Minister for Justice temporarily suspended the processing of visa applications. My officials made arrangements with the Department of Justice whereby they continued to process visa applications in respect of employment permits for critical/essential workers to allow them to travel to Ireland. An email outlining these arrangements issued to all Employment Permits Trusted Partners and a notice was placed on the Department's website.

When an employment permit has issued my officials are not in a position legislatively to amend the time-frame of the permit. In these circumstances, my Department is offering increased flexibility at renewal stage, whereby the permit application for renewal can be processed without a negative view taken if the permit holder travelled to the State after the date of the permit commenced.

Further information on the employment permit COVID 19 contingency arrangements put in place by my Department can be found at;

enterprise.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/COVID-19-Employment-Permits-System-Contingency-Arrangements.pdf

Tax Code

105. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he has examined a report by an organisation (details supplied) with regard to policies acting as disincentives to work for moderate to lower paid employees; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61270/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Ensuring that work pays is a priority for Government.

The issues identified in the ISME Report fall under the policy remit of several Ministers across Government. It highlights a number of issues around the interaction between taxation, social insurance contribution and social welfare policies, a number of which are likely to be examined by the Commission for Taxation and Welfare. The Commission was established in April 2021 as committed to in Programme for Government, and has the objective of examining how the Irish tax and welfare system can be improved to assist in income redistribution, promote employment opportunities and support the most vulnerable workers in the Irish society.

The Commission is expected to submit a report to the Minister for Finance no later than 1 July 2022, after which the Government shall give consideration to any reforms that shall be required in the application of current policies.

Work Permits

106. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the status of a work permit for a person (details supplied) given the urgency outlined in correspondence from the nursing home that is experiencing staff shortages; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61431/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): On 14 June 2021, following a review of the employment permit occupation lists, changes to the employment permit system were announced, to address skills and labour shortages in the healthcare and nursing home sector. Following this review the occupation of Nursing Auxiliary or Assistant (Health Care Assistant) in hospital/nursing home settings became eligible for an employment permit from that date.

The grade of Nursing Auxiliary or Assistant (Health Care Assistant) in Hospital/Nursing Home Settings was removed from the ineligible occupation list within the following framework:

Attainment of a relevant QQI Level 5 qualification after 2 years employment in the State

A minimum remuneration threshold of salary of at least €27,000 for a 39 hour working week.

The framework will be reviewed after twelve months to ensure that the changes announced in June 2021 meet the needs of the sector.

The Employment Permits Section of the Department inform me that all five applications for Health Care Assistants referred to in the details supplied were received on dates between 15-20 October 2021. However on 10th December 2021 all of the applications were refused for a number of reasons.

The applicant has been notified by email of the refusal reasons and of the right to request a review of the decision within 28 days of issue of the refusal decision.

A comprehensive suite of information is available on my Department's website regarding employment permits and a FAQ document which answers the majority of the most common questions is available via the following link - dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Workplace-and-Skills/Employment-Permits/

Regarding the recruitment of three nurses also referred to in the details supplied. If a positive decision is received from the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland regarding their work status their Employment Permit applications should be submitted as soon as possible.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

107. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if the pandemic unemployment payment is being restored to €350 level then should the employment wage subsidy scheme rates increase back to 4 tier rates of €350, €300, €203 and €151.50 to encourage employers to retain staff rather than laying them off; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61657/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Deputy may wish to direct his query to the Department of Finance, which is providing updates on the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme.

Employment Support Services

108. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will ensure that computer equipment being used by a group (details supplied) which is due to close shortly can be repurposed within the local community; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61692/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Issues relating to the restructuring of regional employment services in the Midlands and North West are best answered by the Department of Social Protection. The Deputy may wish to direct her query to that Department.

Industrial Relations

109. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his views on whether retired persons who are members of occupational pension schemes should be granted access to the industrial relations machinery of the State in order that they are given a voice in industrial relations processes with regard to matters affecting occupational pensions and other issues; if he has consulted with the Departments of Social Protection and Public Expenditure and Reform together with trade unions, employers and industrial relations bodies on these issues; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that former workers of State and semi-State organisations are unhappy that they have not received increases in their pensions in recent years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61744/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): The Government agreed to a timed amendment to the Industrial Relations (Provisions in Respect of Pension Entitlements of Retired Workers) Bill 2021. This was to allow time, as has been outlined in the Dáil, to examine all the issues carefully and to ensure that stakeholders - including retired workers themselves, trade unions, employers, industrial

relations bodies, the Departments of Social Protection and Public Expenditure and Reform - are given the opportunity to express their views on these important matters.

Following deliberations in the Dáil, I recently held a meeting with members of the Irish Senior Citizens Parliament who shared with me, and officials from my Department, some of their views on occupational pension schemes.

I intend to shortly launch a public consultation into certain matters raised during consideration of the Industrial Relations (Provisions in Respect of Pension Entitlements of Retired Workers) Bill 2021, and this will include input from organisations representing retired workers.

Economic Policy

110. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will report on Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2021. [61365/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The National Competitiveness and Productivity Council (NCPC) reports to the Taoiseach and the Government, through myself as Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment on key competitiveness and productivity issues facing the Irish economy and offers recommendations on policy actions required to enhance Ireland's competitive position.

On 21 September 2021, the NCPC published *Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2021*, which identified four broad medium- and long-term strategic challenges aimed at enhancing Ireland's competitiveness and productivity performance. The report made 20 targeted and actionable recommendations to Government in order to secure an improvement in the standard of living for all of society.

A formal response to the *Competitiveness Challenge* report was coordinated by the Department of An Taoiseach and published on 30 November 2021. Through this mechanism, the Government has officially responded to the Council on all 20 of the recommendations included in its Report, indicating the range of actions and reforms currently or soon to be in train in response to the recommendations. These actions will support Ireland's competitive position in the coming years.

From my perspective as Minister for Enterprise, Trade & Employment, I welcome the Council's analysis and recommendations. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment will play its part in delivering the reforms outlined by the Council in the seven recommendations where it is listed as the primary actor.

Brexit Issues

111. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his attention has been drawn to the fact that as a result of Brexit persons living in Northern Ireland cannot be a director of a company in Ireland; if his attention has been drawn to the impact this is having on small companies; if he is taking steps to address this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61980/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Robert Troy): At the outset, I should clarify that there is no restriction under company law on residents of Northern Ireland being directors of Irish registered companies. I am taking it that the issue the Deputy is referring to relates to the requirement, as per Section 137 of the Compa-

nies Act 2014, that a company on the register of companies must have at least one EEA resident director. As an alternative, a company can either put a bond in place pursuant to Section 137(2) of the Companies Act 2014, or obtain a certificate, in accordance with Section 140, from the Registrar of Companies certifying that the company has a real and continuous link with one or more economic activities that are being carried on in the State.

As a consequence of the UK leaving the European Union, and the ending of the transition period on 31st December 2020, with effect from 1st January 2021, UK (including Northern Ireland) resident directors of companies registered in Ireland are not considered resident in the EEA for the purposes of Section 137. Companies that previously relied on having a UK (including Northern Ireland) resident director to meet the requirements of Section 137 are required to either appoint an EEA resident director or else pursue one of the alternative options.

I understand that the number of companies impacted by this issue is not readily available but that in the region of 2,000 bonds have been received by the Companies Registration Office in 2021 in relation to the EEA residency requirement.

Work Permits

112. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the options open to persons in cases in which they have an employment permit which is due to expire in the short-term in view of the fact that persons with expired workplace permits are not permitted to work as in the case of a person (details supplied); if the renewal will be expedited given their employer is experiencing a staff shortage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62006/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): In order to work in the State all non-EEA nationals require a valid employment permit or relevant immigration permission from the Minister for Justice and Equality which allows them to reside and work in the State without the requirement for an employment permit.

Applications for employment permits, including renewals, may be submitted online via the Employment Permits Online System which also provides intuitive advice and information on the eligibility requirements and relevant criteria. In order for a renewal application to be considered, it must be submitted to my Department no earlier than four months before the permit is due to expire or within one month of the permit expiry date. An employment permit holder may continue to work whilst their renewal application is being processed. A suite of information is also provided on my Department's website with advice on the different types of permits, remuneration and other eligibility criteria, employer checklists and an FAQ document which answers the majority of the most common questions, all of which are available through this link - dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Workplace-and-Skills/Employment-Permits/.

The Employment Permits Section of my Department inform me that on 13th October 2021 a renewal application for a General Employment Permit was received in respect of the named person. As the renewal application was received within the prescribed timeframe for renewals set out in the employment permits legislation, the individual concerned can continue to work in her employment while waiting for the renewal application submitted on her behalf to be processed.

Applications for employment permits are processed in date order, Employment Permits Section are currently processing standard applications received on 17th August 2021. Appli-

cants 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.

Cybersecurity Policy

113. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress being made with the National Cyber Security Strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61673/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): The National Cyber Security Strategy 2019-2024 is a whole-of-Government approach to address the growing threat of cyber security incidents and to ensure that Ireland can benefit fully from the digital transformation. The Strategy includes 20 separate measures to safeguard public sector networks and essential services, to facilitate the development of the cybersecurity industry and to promote awareness raising and international cooperation. A number of measures are being led by my Department, and I am pleased to report that good progress is being made on their delivery.

As part of the implementation of the Strategy, earlier this year external consultants were commissioned to conduct a Capacity Review and to benchmark the NCSC with similar agencies in Europe and internationally. The report on the Capacity Review was received in June 2021 and in July the Government agreed a number of measures to support the continued development of the NCSC over the coming five years.The measures agreed include increasing the overall fulltime staffing complement of the NCSC to at least 70 over the next 5 years. with a first tranche of an additional 20 staff recruited by end 2022 bringing the serving complement to 45. A cyber security graduate training programme will also be introduced. In addition, the General Scheme of a Bill will be prepared for Government approval, to establish the NCSC on a statutory basis and provide for related matters including clarity around its mandate.

My Department has also recently published the baseline cyber security standard to be applied by all Government Departments and Agencies. The NCSC has worked with colleagues across Government to develop the standard which will support public bodies to identify cyber risks, deploy appropriate mitigation measures, and protect personal and other important data.

At the time of its publication, a commitment was made to conduct a mid-term review of the Strategy. This was also a recommendation in the recent NCSC Capacity Review. It is intended that this review will be conducted in the second half of 2022 and will take account of the evolving global threat landscape, EU cybersecurity policy developments such as the review of the Network and Information Services Directive, as well as lessons learned from the HSE cyber security incident in May 2021.

Energy Prices

114. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the action that will be taken to address spiralling energy prices. [61687/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Government is acutely aware of the impact that the recent increases in energy prices is having on households.

This is a global phenomenon and expert commentators, including the International Energy Agency (IEA), have attributed this to a range of demand and supply factors that have contributed to a tightening of the European gas market supplies and the upward trend in wholesale gas prices we have witnessed since mid 2020. The best long-term approach for Ireland to insulate consumers from volatility on international wholesale energy markets is to invest in energy efficiency, renewable energy and to expand interconnection with our European and neighbouring markets and to deepen internal electricity market integration.

Government's immediate response to address the increase in domestic energy prices has been to utilise the tax and social welfare system to counter rising costs of living. Budget 2022 increased the weekly rate of the Fuel Allowance so that €914 will be paid to eligible households over the course of this winter. Increases to the Qualified Child Payment, the Living Alone Allowance and an increase to the income threshold for the Working Family Payment were also announced.

Consumers should continue to switch or engage with their energy supplier and many households could still save on their bills if they did so. As recently as the 9th December, switching supplier could save a customer consuming the average amount of electricity up to €313.

CRU has in place a suite of protections against disconnection that are set out in the Supplier Handbook. In brief, priority customers cannot be disconnected, while vulnerable customers are protected over winter months from 1 November to 31 March each year while a CRU moratoria on disconnections for all customers comes into effect over the Christmas period. Additionally, under the supplier led voluntary Energy Engage Code, suppliers will not disconnect a customer who is engaging with them at any time.

Furthermore, due to the ongoing pressure on households, the Government agreed today to provide a once off credit of €100 to every domestic electricity account holder, through their electricity supplier in quarter one of 2022."

Energy Prices

115. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will consider in the absence of a reduction in VAT on domestic energy sources including electricity, a discount scheme for low and middle income households that would then be reimbursed to providers in a similar manner to the operation of the free electricity allowance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61995/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Government is acutely aware of the impact that the recent increases in global energy prices is having on households.

This is a global phenomenon and various commentators, including the International Energy Agency, have attributed this to a range of demand and supply factors that have contributed to a tightening of the European gas market supplies and the upward trend in wholesale gas prices we have witnessed since mid 2020. The best long-term approach for Ireland to insulate consumers from volatility on international wholesale energy markets is to invest in energy efficiency, renewable energy and expand interconnection with our European and neighbouring markets and deepen internal electricity market integration.

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Furthermore, due to the ongoing pressure on households, the Government agreed today to provide a once off credit of €100 to every domestic electricity account holder, through their electricity supplier in quarter one of 2022."

Departmental Data

116. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of homes that will be retrofitted in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61990/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The National Retrofit Plan, published last month as part of the Climate Action Plan, set ambitious targets to retrofit 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2 or carbon equivalent and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings by the end of 2030. These targets represent a very significant increase in both the volume and depth of retrofit activity in Ireland.

COVID-19 related restrictions on construction activity in the residential sector between January and April have had a significant impact on activity this year. The SEAI estimates that approximately 16,000 retrofits will be supported by SEAI in 2021. Of this number 2,350 will be energy poverty retrofits and 4,700 will be B2 retrofits. To the end of October, 11,418 retrofits had been delivered, including 3,103 B2 retrofits and 1,625 energy poverty homes.

Budget 2022 commits €202 million in carbon tax revenue to fund the SEAI residential and community retrofit schemes and a further €10 million from the Exchequer for the Solar PV scheme. This investment will support over 22,000 home energy upgrades, including over 6,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating (BER) of B2 and over 4,500 upgrades under the SEAI energy poverty schemes. It will deliver warmer, healthier and more comfortable homes with lower energy bills. It will also reduce emissions from the residential sector and improve air quality.

The detailed current and capital allocations for 2022 are being finalised as part of my Department's annual business planning process. The final Programme allocations will be included in the Revised Estimates Volume to be published later this month. These will be reflected in the SEAI business planning process.

The Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage will invest a further €85m as part of the Local Authority Retrofit Programme in 2022. This will deliver approximately 2,400 B2/cost optimal retrofits next year.

The total spend that is attributable to labour costs and the average spend per unit of housing is not readily available. However, retrofitting homes is highly labour-intensive and creates quality sustainable jobs in local communities throughout the country, it is estimated that up to 60% of total retrofit cost can be labour. The request for detailed information has been sent to the SEAI and available data will be forwarded to the Deputy as soon as possible upon receipt.

The SEAI's total spend and no. of homes completed on retrofitting schemes* for 2018 - 2020 were:

Year	Spend	Houses
2018	€91.5m	21,478
2019	€104.1m	24,742
2020**	€78.25m	17,671

*Includes Better Energy Homes, Better Energy Warmer Homes, Warmth and Wellbeing, Deep Retrofit, Communities Energy Grants, Solar P.V and Better Energy Finance schemes.

** In 2020, in line with public health and Government guidelines in place to stop the spread of COVID-19, all works under SEAI funded schemes were advised to pause for a period of time.

Question No. 117 answered with Question No. 69.

Illegal Dumping

118. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to tackle the rise in illegal dumping; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61189/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): 2020 data indicates an increase in the reporting of illegal dumping incidents, perhaps due to increased activity levels locally due to lockdown. However, data received from the National Litter Pollution Monitoring System for 2020 and from the Waste Enforcement Regional Lead Authorities (WERLAs) indicates that this was not matched by a corresponding increase in illegal dumping volumes.

€3m was allocated to local authorities under the 2021 Anti-Dumping Initiative (ADI) and while 2022 ADI Allocations are yet to be finalised, I intend to ensure that a similar amount will be made available.

My Department will also continue to invest significantly in the local authority waste enforcement network under the Local Authority Waste Enforcement Measures Grant Scheme. €7.7m was provided under the scheme in 2021, while over €1mn was provided to support the ongoing enhancement of the role, capacity and responsibilities of the WERLAs. Support for both will continue in 2022.

€4m was also provided to local authorities in 2021 under a new Litter Infrastructure Support Grant Scheme, designed to support local authority provision of additional litter infrastructure in the context of the Government's emphasis on an outdoor summer. Over 1,300 bins have been purchased and installed by local authorities under this scheme, including over 400 smart bins.

In addition, the Circular Economy Bill, currently undergoing pre-legislative scrutiny, will advance a number of priority provisions identified in the Waste Action Plan for a Circular

Economy, including providing for the GDPR-compliant use of a range of technologies, such as CCTV for waste and litter enforcement purposes and the introduction of new Fixed Penalty Notices for illegal dumping offences. Other relevant measures outlined in the Waste Action Plan will also be progressed during 2022.

Postal Services

119. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the correct contact details for TDs and Senators to use in order to contact An Post on behalf of persons who have complaints and concerns that are not being addressed via the usual channels of communication with An Post; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61194/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): In accordance with Circular 25/2016, An Post also provides a dedicated email address for Oireachtas members. The relevant contact details have been forwarded to the Deputy directly.

An Post has a dedicated Customer Service Charter page on its website outlining the complaints process in place by the company. www.anpost.com/Customer-Charter/Feedback-Complaints

The Commission for Communications Regulation, ComReg, is the statutory body responsible for the regulation of the electronic communications sector (telecommunications, radio communications, broadcasting transmission and premium rate services) and the postal sector. Full contacts details for ComReg are available at www.comreg.ie/

Offshore Exploration

120. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will provide information on an offshore petroleum exploration licence (details supplied); if the licence remains in operation; if consented or permitted activities remain underway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61207/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Information on all petroleum authorisations is updated and published on a quarterly basis on gov.ie (www.gov.ie/en/publication/10d43-acreage-reports-and-concession-maps/). The most recent such report was published in respect of the three-month period ending 30 September 2021.

In addition, Section 57 of the Petroleum and Other Minerals Development Act 1960 requires that I lay before the Houses of the Oireachtas every six months a report detailing all petroleum authorisations extant and granted during the period of the report. The last such report laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas was in respect of the six-month period ending 30 June 2021.

In February 2021 I granted approval to the licensees to undertake a seabed geophysical, environmental baseline and habitat assessment survey within the licensed area referred to. This survey took place in October 2021.

Departmental Schemes

121. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the supports or grants in place for hotels converting heating systems to CHP boilers to become more energy efficient. [61237/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): There are a wide range of capital supports funded by my Department and administered by the SEAI that enable all businesses to reduce their carbon emissions and improve their energy efficiency:

- The Support Scheme for Renewable Heat (SSRH) provides financial support in the adoption of renewable heating systems by commercial, industrial, agricultural, district heating and other non-domestic heat users. This includes biomass or biogas High Efficiency CHP heating systems

- EXEED Certified grant scheme supports organisations with the costs of embedding energy efficient design in their assets, to reduce lifecycle impact with lower energy use and carbon emissions.

- Support Scheme for Energy Audits supports SMEs with a €2,000 voucher towards the costs of a professional energy audit.

- Communities Energy Grant (CEG) Scheme makes grant funding available for community-based partnerships to improve the energy efficiency of the building stock in their area.

Other supports for businesses include:

- Project Assistance Grants helping fund feasibility studies and business cases for energy performance improvements.

- Training (SEAI Energy Academy), information and advisory service, access to energy auditing services and case studies of best practice.

- Large Industry Energy Network where members work together to improve energy performance and share experiences.

- Accelerated Capital Allowances is a tax incentive scheme which allows businesses to reduce their taxable profits by the full level of expenditure on energy efficient equipment in the year the investment is made.

Full details on these supports are available at: www.seai.ie/business-and-public-sector/

Cybersecurity Policy

122. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the future direction for the State to ensure that Ireland's connected future is safe; and if the State has plans to develop its cyber-security capabilities in this regard. [61244/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): The National Cyber Security Strategy 2019-2024 is a whole-of-Government strategy to address the growing threat of cyber security incidents, to ensure Ireland can benefit fully from the digital transformation. The Strategy includes 20 separate measures to safeguard public sector networks and essential services, to support the development of Ireland's cyber security industry and ensure we play our part in defending a free, open, secure and stable cyberspace. A number of measures are being led by my Department, and good progress is being

made on their delivery. For instance, my Department has recently published the baseline cyber security standard to be applied by all Government Departments and key agencies. The National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) has worked with colleagues across Government to develop the standard which will support public bodies to identify cyber risks, deploy appropriate mitigation measures, and protect personal and other important data. In addition, the Computer Security Incident Response Team (CSIRT) based within the NCSC has developed and deployed technology on the infrastructure of Government Departments to detect and warn of certain types of threat.

Recognising the growing dependence on digital services and the evolving global cyber threat landscape, earlier this year Minister Ryan commissioned external consultants to conduct a Capacity Review and to benchmark the NCSC with similar agencies in Europe and internationally. Minister Ryan and I received the report in June 2021 and in July the Government agreed a number of measures to support the continued development of the NCSC over the coming five years. These measures include increasing the overall fulltime staffing complement of the NCSC to at least 70 over the next 5 years with a first tranche of an additional 20 staff recruited by end 2022 bringing the serving complement to 45. The Government also approved the preparation of a General Scheme of a Bill, for Government approval, to establish the NCSC on a statutory basis and provide for related matters including clarity around its mandate.

Question No. 123 answered with Question No. 81.

National Broadband Plan

124. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he has been notified by National Broadband Ireland of the amount in loans made available to same by a company (details supplied) that holds a five per cent interest in National Broadband Ireland. [61371/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): I have been advised that National Broadband Ireland has only received shareholder loans from Metallah Limited, its holding company.

While there are other holding companies in the structure, which is commonplace to facilitate investment in large scale critical infrastructure projects, I am advised that the substantive entities providing the investment to Metallah Limited are Granahan McCourt Fund Limited (a David McCourt controlled company) and Tel-IE Broadband Sari, an entity managed and controlled by Oak Hill Advisors.

Question No. 125 answered with Question No. 81.

Departmental Schemes

126. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps he is taking to limit waste from fast fashion; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61458/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): There are a wide range of capital supports funded by my Department and administered by the SEAI that enable all businesses to reduce their carbon emissions and improve their energy efficiency:

- The Support Scheme for Renewable Heat (SSRH) provides financial support in the adoption of renewable heating systems by commercial, industrial, agricultural, district heating and other non-domestic heat users. This includes biomass or biogas High Efficiency CHP heating systems

- EXEED Certified grant scheme supports organisations with the costs of embedding energy efficient design in their assets, to reduce lifecycle impact with lower energy use and carbon emissions.

- Support Scheme for Energy Audits supports SMEs with a €2,000 voucher towards the costs of a professional energy audit.

- Communities Energy Grant (CEG) Scheme makes grant funding available for community-based partnerships to improve the energy efficiency of the building stock in their area.

Other supports for businesses include:

- Project Assistance Grants helping fund feasibility studies and business cases for energy performance improvements.

- Training (SEAI Energy Academy), information and advisory service, access to energy auditing services and case studies of best practice.

- Large Industry Energy Network where members work together to improve energy performance and share experiences.

- Accelerated Capital Allowances is a tax incentive scheme which allows businesses to reduce their taxable profits by the full level of expenditure on energy efficient equipment in the year the investment is made.

Full details on these supports are available at: www.seai.ie/business-and-public-sector/

Illegal Dumping

127. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the work by his Department in conjunction with other relevant State bodies in enabling the use of CCTV to combat dumping, particularly in environmentally sensitive areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61515/21]

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, following consultation with the Data Protection Commissioners, the Department of Justice and the Waste Enforcement Regional Lead Authorities (WERLAs), 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.

Electricity Generation

128. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps taken to ensure security of electricity supply for the forthcoming winter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61516/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Commission for Regulation of Utilities (the CRU) has statutory responsibility to ensure security of electricity supply. This includes the duty to monitor security of electricity supply and to take such measures as it considers necessary to protect security of supply. The Commission for Regulation of Utilities is assisted in its statutory role by EirGrid.

The challenges to security of electricity supply are set out in EirGrid's Generation Capacity Statement 2021-2030 and Winter Outlook 2021/2022, which were published in September and October respectively.

In September, the CRU published an information note, setting out the programme of actions they are leading in order to address these challenges. These actions include:

- increasing the availability of existing generators;

- developing new generation capacity;

- extending the operational life of some existing generators; and

- actions to enhance demand-side response, including large consumers reducing demand when the system margin is low.

Last month, the Government approved and published a new Policy Statement on Electricity Security of Supply, which supports the CRU's programme of actions.

My Department continues to work closely with the CRU and EirGrid to implement the programme of actions and ensure security of electricity supply.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

129. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the modelling that was used by the Government to calculate the emission reduction targets under the 2021 Climate Action Plan; if it was the same as those used in the Climate Change Advisory Council's Carbon Budget technical report. [61522/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The approach and scope of the modelling used for determining the indicative emissions reduction targets for the 2021 Climate Action Plan (CAP) and for the modelling used in developing the Climate Change Advisory Council's (CCAC) proposed carbon budget programme were, in both cases, closely determined by the requirements established under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021– specifically the requirement that Ireland must cut its greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 51% by the end of this decade.

Ireland's 2021 CAP is underpinned by modelling inputs from the broad spectrum of exper-

tise available to the Government, as well as contracted technical input from a range of bodies and organisations. It was also informed by a public consultation and call for expert evidence. Outputs from the modelling have assisted in developing indicative ranges of emissions reductions for each sector of the economy by 2030 to achieve the 51% reduction, and set us on a pathway to achieving net zero emission by 2050. This included indicating the types of actions needed to deliver on our climate targets. The indicative sectoral ranges will be replaced by legally binding specific sectoral ceilings in the 2022 Climate Action Plan, following their adoption by Government once the economy-wide carbon budgets are approved by the Oireachtas.

Some of the experts that fed into the preparation of the Climate Action Plan may separately have provided analytical input to the CCAC as part of its work on the carbon budgets. However, it is important to note that the CCAC acts as an independent advisory body, and any research or modelling undertaken by the CCAC is carried out under that mandate. This includes the development of the CCAC's recently proposed carbon budget programme. Details of the specific analysis used by the CCAC is outlined in its carbon budget technical report, which can be found at www.climatecouncil.ie.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

130. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the expected emissions reductions by 2030 from the Government's plan to deliver the equivalent of 500,000 homes retrofitted to a BER of B2 cost optimal or carbon equivalent and to install 600,000 heat pumps in residential buildings in tabular form. [61523/21]

131. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the expected emissions reduction from the National Retrofit Plan by 2030. [61524/21]

132. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the expected emissions reduction from the National Retrofit Plan and the annual breakdown in tabular form. [61525/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 130 to 132, inclusive, together.

The 2021 Climate Action Plan (CAP 2021) committed to reducing emissions from the residential and commercial buildings sectors to between 3.5 - 4.5 Mt CO2eq. by 2030, from 7.9 Mt in 2018. CAP 2021 did not, however, include either cumulative or annual emissions savings on the specific contribution of the Plan's retrofit or heat pump deployment targets.

CAP 2021 also set out an ambitious National Retrofit Plan detailing how the targets to retrofit 500,000 dwellings and to deploy 600,000 heat pump installations would be met. CAP 2021 also included the following key commitments for the residential and commercial buildings sectors:

- Strengthening the existing NZEB requirements for new dwellings to effectively ban fossil fuels in new dwellings;

- Ramp-up of zero emissions heat in commercial buildings; and

- Increased targets for the roll-out of district heating.

Aside from reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, residential retrofit brings additional

benefits, including reduced energy costs, improved comfort and health, less dependency on fossil fuels, and improvements in indoor and outdoor air quality.

The National Retrofit Plan estimates that, between 2019 and 2025, almost 185,000 home energy upgrades will be delivered with over 83,000 to a B2/cost optimal level. When the emissions savings from the non-B2 upgrades are included, this is the equivalent of 120,000 B2 upgrades over the period. As a result, there will a need to deliver, on average, approximately 75,000 B2-equivalent home upgrades per year from 2026 to 2030 to achieve the overall target of 500,000 by 2030.

Question No. 131 answered with Question No. 130.

Question No. 132 answered with Question No. 130.

Departmental Programmes

133. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the amount of the Energy Transformation Programme that was allocated to decarbonising electricity in Budget 2021 and 2022, respectively; and the breakdown across each programme subhead by current and capital funding in tabular form. [61526/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Current and Capital allocations to the Energy Transformation Programme in Budgets 2021 and 2022 are shown below:

	2021			2022		
Programme (€m)	Current	Capital	Total	Current	Capital	Total
B - ENERGY TRANSFORMATION	44	270	314	51	318	368

The 2022 allocation which represents a 17% increase for my Department over 2021 includes €10 million from the Exchequer to the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) solar PV grant scheme. This is an increase on the €8 million capital allocation for 2021.

Budget 2022 also commits €202 million from carbon tax revenues to fund the SEAI residential and community retrofit schemes, and an allocation of €31 million for energy efficiency and renewable energy schemes in businesses and the public sector. Decarbonisation of electricity is achieved by the inclusion of solar PV as one of a range of measures supported under these schemes.

The detailed current and capital allocations in 2022 are being finalised as part of my Department's annual business planning process. The final Programme allocations will be included in the Revised Estimates Volume to be published later this month.

It is worth noting however that decarbonisation of electricity is not only funded through my Department's Vote. This year, the PSO levy is entirely related to renewable electricity supports, including the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS), to support our national energy policy objectives. The RESS is the Government's flagship programme to deliver on our renewable electricity targets by providing support to renewable electricity projects through competitive auctions. The RESS will be the main measure in achieving our Climate Action Plan 2021 target of reducing emissions for the electricity sector to between 2 and 4 MtCO2eq by 2030.

Question No. 134 answered with Question No. 83.

Question No. 135 answered with Question No. 51.

Environmental Policy

136. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the measures that will be taken to achieve the targets agreed at the COP 26 United Nations Climate Change Conference. [54701/21]

137. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps Ireland will take to achieve the targets agreed at the COP 26 United Nations Climate Change Conference. [54702/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 136 and 137 together.

The 'Glasgow Climate Pact', while reflecting a compromise of positions and adopted by consensus of all Parties concerned, keeps alive the ambition of restricting global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees. It strikes a balance between increasing climate ambition, delivering on calls for increased climate finance and adaptation supports, and concrete actions to take forward in each of these areas. Focus must now turn to delivering on these commitments.In this regard, I welcome the work programme adopted in the COP26 Decision aimed to cut emissions in this decade. International cooperation is essential to effective climate action. Ireland will continue to work alongside our EU colleagues and with all Parties to accelerate climate action and ambition to deliver on the goals of the Paris Agreement.

In Ireland, we are already taking decisive action. The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 commits Ireland to achieve a climate neutral economy by no later than 2050, and provides for a 51% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 compared to 2018 levels. The Act significantly strengthens the overarching climate governance framework and embeds a process of carbon budgeting, including sectoral emissions ceilings. Establishing these requirements in legislation places a clear obligation on this and future governments for sustained climate action. The recently published Climate Action Plan 2021 provides a detailed roadmap for meeting our climate ambition under the Act and sets out indicative ranges of emissions reductions for each sector of the economy. These ranges will become specific ceilings in the Climate Action Plan 2022, following the legal adoption of carbon budgets and sectoral emissions ceilings.

Together these initiatives will ensure we deliver on our national commitment to achieve the targets agreed at COP 26.

Question No. 137 answered with Question No. 136.

Commissions of Investigation

138. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of commissions of investigation currently ongoing under the remit of his Department; the duration of each commission of investigation; the deadline for each commission of investigation; and the actual and projected cost of each commission of investigation. [54098/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): There are no Commissions of Investigation ongoing under the remit of my Department.

Climate Change Policy

139. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to develop clear pathways for the latest research to provide an evidence base for the National Dialogue on Climate Action and the Interdepartmental Working Group in order to drive sectoral demand shifts, behavioural change and policy input as outlined in the Climate Action Plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [58649/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The role of National Dialogue on Climate Action (NDCA) is to engage, enable and empower everyone in society to transition to a climate neutral economy in a way that is fair, just, and accessible.

The delivery of the objectives of the NDCA will be measured through qualitative and quantitative research. The NDCA work programme annual cycle will be implemented in a manner that facilitates the analysis of insights gained from research and from engagement activity. These insights will constitute an evidence base to inform the NDCA, sectoral plans, and the Climate Action Plan. To facilitate this, a behavioural study will be carried out every two years, together with ad-hoc qualitative research. A national climate change behavioural insights and implementation unit has been established in the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and a national social and behavioural advisory group on climate action will also be established.

In this regard, my Department has provided funding for the EPA's "Climate Change in the Irish Mind" project, the first report of which was launched last week. This project is a baseline study of climate change beliefs, policy preferences and behaviour of the Irish public to climate change, and is based on a survey of more than 4,000 Irish people during the summer of 2021 conducted by Behaviours and Attitudes.

Key findings of the research are:

- Irish people are in almost full agreement that climate change is happening and 85% are worried about it.

- 91% of people say climate change is important to them personally, and 79% say climate change should be either a "very high" or "high" priority for the Government of Ireland.

- Irish people strongly support a range of policies to address climate change. People also think that climate action will increase jobs, economic growth and quality of life (78%).

This, as part of the wider research programme, will provide valuable insights to inform the development of policies, measures and actions that will support people in order to drive necessary sectoral demand shifts and behavioural change .

Research and Development

140. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to help support the offshore and ocean energy research and innovation as outlined in the Climate Action Plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [58650/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department, through SEAI, has supported the development of ocean technologies for 10 years, investing approximately €20 million. Since 2019, ocean and offshore energy research and innovation has been funded through SEAI's RD&D programme.

SEAI has developed and funds test and demonstration facilities for ocean energy technologies in Ireland. The LiR National Ocean Test Facility, based in Ringaskiddy, Co. Cork consists of state-of-the-art wave tanks and electrical rigs that allow for scaled testing in a controlled environment.

The Marine Institute is collaborating with SEAI, MaREI (UCC) and Bluewise Marine to develop a national test and demonstration facility in north Galway Bay, near Spiddal. This ocean energy test site is for marine energy and technology. The Atlantic Marine Energy Test Site (AMETS) is being developed by the SEAI to facilitate testing of full-scale wave energy converters in an open ocean environment. AMETS will be located off Annagh Head, in County Mayo and will be connected to the national grid. SEAI runs the Ocean Energy Ireland Portal, which offers a guide to marine renewable energy development in Ireland. SEAI is also part of a pan-European research consortium, funded by EU Interreg, focused on Ocean Power Innovation Network (OPIN).

To deliver on the Climate Action Plan, the SEAI is commencing the preparation of an offshore/ocean roadmap to support the development and rollout of the technologies. The roadmap will outline targets, develop pathways and establish timelines for the deployment of the technologies. It will highlight key decision points, identify enablers and establish owners of each task.

Question No. 141 answered with Question No. 83.

National Broadband Plan

142. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of instances in which the State has relied on legal enforcement of the National Broadband Plan contract since it was signed to date. [61576/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): To protect the State investment and ensure that the NBP milestones and deliverables are met, the NBP contract has been designed to include extensive protections, quality checks, reporting and monitoring obligations. The Department, as the contracting authority, manages all of the elements of contract governance. The Department has a core existing team, which is augmented by specialist external services to effectively manage the contract. These include technical, commercial advisory, business process and legal services. A governance structure has been established within the Department to monitor contract compliance and a suite of processes have been developed to manage the contract. These include the active monitoring and tracking of compliance on an ongoing basis. To date, no circumstances have arisen that required recourse to legal enforcement measures.

Question No. 143 answered with Question No. 83.

Question No. 144 answered with Question No. 81.

Question No. 145 answered with Question No. 81.

Planning Issues

146. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the costs pertaining to his Department and An Bord Pleanála and the Department's agencies in respect of all appeal and judicial review applications instituted against his Department and or An Bord Pleanála by case in each of the years since January 2016; and if he will make a statement on the matter. and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61742/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Office of the Chief State Solicitor provide representation to the Minister in respect cases before the courts. The costs of such representation are discharged by the Office of the Chief State Solicitor. Third party costs orders against the Minister are, subject to assessment or as the case may be, adjudication, discharged by the Minister. In this respect, there have been no third-party legal costs paid directly by my Department as a result of appeals and judicial reviews as referenced in Deputy's question from decisions made by An Board Pleanala.

An Bord Pleanála is an independent statutory body which does not come under the remit of my Department.

The information requested in relation to the agencies under the aegis of my Department is an operational matter for each agency. The Department will request the relevant bodies to reply directly to the Deputy with the information requested in respect of their organisations.

Departmental Schemes

147. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he plans to offer zero-interest green loans to homeowners and renters to retrofit their residences; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61828/21]

174. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the low-cost loan scheme for retrofitting residential homes is open for applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61978/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 147 and 174 together.

The Climate Action Plan and National Retrofit Plan have set ambitious targets to retrofit 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2 or carbon equivalent and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings by the end of 2030.My Department is engaging with the Department of Finance, the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland and the European Investment Bank in relation to the development of a residential retrofit loan guarantee scheme, which will be one of a range of measures to help achieve the retrofit targets.

The residential retrofit loan guarantee scheme has been selected for inclusion in Ireland's National Recovery and Resilience Plan and will be co-funded by the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility and Exchequer funding. The target for introduction of the scheme is mid-2022.

The loan guarantee will provide risk protection to retail credit institutions participating in the scheme. Zero interest rate loans are not envisaged under the scheme. However, the loan guarantee will enable credit institutions to offer loans with reduced interest rates to private homeowners and non-corporate landlords and make comprehensive home energy efficiency upgrades more affordable to consumers. This approach will signal to the banking sector new, sustainable business opportunities associated with retrofit and the transition to a low carbon

economy as well as increasing the volume of retrofit activity within the State.

Departmental Schemes

148. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if there are grants available for the purchase of a generator (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61855/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): While it is a rare event, some electricity consumers can be without power from time to time. This can occur due to weather related events, such as the recent Storm Barra, network faults and network maintenance.

It is also possible that some consumers could be without electricity due to insufficient generation to meet demand. However, it should be noted that there have been no instances of this in recent times and procedures are in place to ensure that, if such an event were to happen, larger consumers would be requested to reduce their electricity use before homes and small business would be impacted.

While my Department does not offer grants for the purchase of generators, ESB Networks has a policy to support vulnerable customers particularly those who are more vulnerable to loss of electricity supply. Electricity customers can register as vulnerable customers via their electricity supplier and further details are available on the ESB Networks website at the following link: www.esbnetworks.ie/docs/default-source/publications/vulnerable-customer-policy.pdf

Departmental Schemes

149. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the total spend by the SEAI on the retrofitting and renovation of housing in each of the years 2018, 2019 and 2020; the share of that total spend that is attributable to labour costs; the average spend per unit of housing in each of the years 2018, 2019 and 2020; the share of that spend that is attributable to labour costs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61876/21]

171. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of homes that will be retrofitted in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61966/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Question Nos 149 and 171 together.

The National Retrofit Plan, published last month as part of the Climate Action Plan, set ambitious targets to retrofit 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2 or carbon equivalent and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings by the end of 2030. These targets represent a very significant increase in both the volume and depth of retrofit activity in Ireland.

COVID-19 related restrictions on construction activity in the residential sector between January and April have had a significant impact on activity this year. The SEAI estimates that approximately 16,000 retrofits will be supported by SEAI in 2021. Of this number 2,350 will be energy poverty retrofits and 4,700 will be B2 retrofits. To the end of October, 11,418 retrofits had been delivered, including 3,103 B2 retrofits and 1,625 energy poverty homes.

Budget 2022 commits €202 million in carbon tax revenue to fund the SEAI residential and community retrofit schemes and a further €10 million from the Exchequer for the Solar PV scheme. This investment will support over 22,000 home energy upgrades, including over 6,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating (BER) of B2 and over 4,500 upgrades under the SEAI energy poverty schemes. It will deliver warmer, healthier and more comfortable homes with lower energy bills. It will also reduce emissions from the residential sector and improve air quality.

The detailed current and capital allocations for 2022 are being finalised as part of my Department's annual business planning process. The final Programme allocations will be included in the Revised Estimates Volume to be published later this month. These will be reflected in the SEAI business planning process.

The Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage will invest a further €85m as part of the Local Authority Retrofit Programme in 2022. This will deliver approximately 2,400 B2 / cost optimal retrofits next year.

The total spend that is attributable to labour costs and the average spend per unit of housing is not readily available. However, retrofitting homes is highly labour-intensive and creates quality sustainable jobs in local communities throughout the country, it is estimated that up to 60% of total retrofit cost can be labour. The request for detailed information has been sent to the SEAI and available data will be forwarded to the Deputy as soon as possible upon receipt.

The SEAI's total spend and no. of homes completed on retrofitting schemes* for 2018 - 2020 were:

- 2018 €91.5m 21,478

- 2019 €104.1m 24,742

- 2020** €78.25m 17,671

*Includes Better Energy Homes, Better Energy Warmer Homes, Warmth & Wellbeing, Deep Retrofit, Communities Energy Grants, Solar P.V and Better Energy Finance schemes.

** In 2020, in line with public health and Government guidelines in place to stop the spread of COVID-19, all works under SEAI funded schemes were advised to pause for a period of time.

Seirbhísí Dátheangacha

150. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den Aire Comhshaoil, Aeráide agus Cumarsáide an bhfuil sé i gceist aige reachtaíocht a thabhairt isteach a chuirfeadh iachall ar An Post a chinntiú go mbeadh gach stampa a d'eiseofaí ar a laghadh dhátheangach agus an oiread céanna Gaeilge agus Béarla, nó Gaeilge amháin, orthu, ag tógáil san áireamh gurb í an Ghaeilge an teanga náisiúnta; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [61925/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): Tagann an Coiste Comhairleach Stampshanais, Coiste neamhspleách ar a bhfuil gairmeoirí atá ina saineolaithe ina réimsí agus a cuireadh ar bun le comhairle a thabhairt maidir leis an ábhar do gach clár bliantúil stampaí, le chéile uair nó dhó sa bhliain chun ábhair a mholadh do An Post le cur san áireamh i gclár bliantúil stampaí An Post.

Cé nach bhfuil aon phleananna agam reachtaíocht a thabhairt isteach sa réimse seo ag an am seo, tá an t-ábhar a luadh curtha faoi bhráid An Post agam agus tá iarrtha agam orthu an togra

a d'ardaigh an Teachta a bhreithniú agus an tsaincheist shonrach a ardaíodh a chur ar shúile an Choiste.

National Broadband Plan

151. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress in the development of high speed, high quality broadband in all areas throughout the country, urban and or rural; if he has proposals to accelerate the programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61936/21]

159. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when it might be determined that the National Broadband Plan will be developed to the extent anticipated at this stage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61947/21]

161. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the parts of the country that have yet to gain access to modern, updated broadband service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61949/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): I propose to take Questions Nos. 151, 159 and 161 together.

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 679 schools.

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

Despite the unprecedented challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, NBI has made steady progress on delivery of the new high speed fibre broadband network under the National Broadband Plan with almost 35,000 premises available to order and pre-order across 13 counties (Carlow, Cavan, Clare, Cork, Galway, Kerry, Limerick, Louth, Monaghan, Roscommon, Tipperary, Wexford and Wicklow). NBI has advised that over 282,000 premises in the Intervention Area across all counties have been surveyed and build work is underway for more than 120,000 premises, demonstrating the project is reaching scale.

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. My Department has worked closely with NBI to put in place a remedial plan under the Contract.

NBI has implemented a number of measures to help lessen the impact that these challenges have had on the rollout including:-

- Increasing the rate of pole replacement and duct remediation per month;

- Bringing in additional NBI resources;

- Earlier procurement of material used in the build stages; and

- Bringing in additional subcontractors

The focus for 2022 is to continue to deliver momentum in the build programme, catch up on the delays experienced and plan for acceleration. Final targets for 2022 are expected to be agreed early in the new year.

Environmental Policy

152. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the degree to which he continues to propose and pursue eco-friendly policies with a positive impact on the environment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61940/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department leads on a range of cross-cutting policies which have a positive impact on the environment. Following on from the enactment of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act in July, I recently published the Climate Action Plan 2021 which sets out how Ireland will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 51% by 2030 relative to 2018, and puts us on a pathway to achieving climate neutrality no later than 2050.

My Department is also currently preparing a Whole-of-Government Circular Economy Strategy which will set out policies, measures and actions to support moving away from today's 'take-make-waste' model of production to more sustainable production and consumption, which will support climate mitigation - an OECD study of four countries' greenhouse gas emissions found that emissions from materials management accounted for between 55% and 65% of national emissions.

I am also finalising a new Clean Air Strategy, and developing a comprehensive regime for the regulation of domestic solid fuels. The Strategy will outline how we will enhance and protect the quality of the air we breathe and realise the full environmental and health benefits of cleaner air. It will set out a pathway, based on a comprehensive cross-Government programme of policies and measures, that will tackle all sources of air pollution, including those from transport, agriculture, and the commercial and residential sectors.

In addition, my Department is active in setting policies and standards for radiation and noise, and is responsible for the environmental aspects of policy on soils, genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and chemicals. The Department also funds the work of the Environmental Protection Agency which is responsible for protecting and improving the environment as a valuable asset for the people of Ireland.

Climate Change Policy

153. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which he expects to meet carbon reduction targets without impacting on the food production sector given the likelihood of a strained food supply chain in the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61941/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 commits Ireland to a legally binding target of net-zero greenhouse gas emissions no later than 2050, and a reduction of 51% by 2030.

In order to deliver upon this ambition, the Government published Climate Action Plan 2021 in November 2021, which will put Ireland on a more sustainable path, cutting emissions, creating a cleaner, greener economy and society, and protecting us from the devastating consequences of climate change. The Plan sets out indicative ranges of emissions reductions for each sector of the economy based on their respective starting points, and the relative difficulty, cost, speed, and benefits, of reducing emissions. The ranges will be converted to legally binding specific sectoral ceilings following the adoption of economy-wide carbon budgets by Government and the Oireachtas in early 2022. The Plan also sets out the actions needed to deliver on our climate targets, across all economic sectors, including the agriculture sector.

In the agriculture sector, we must focus on a number of key areas. We must support and help our farmers to continue to roll out improvements in our farming practices. This is appropriate from both a consumer point of view, and from a financial perspective, as higher efficiencies often mean less costs. It is important Ireland maintains our reputation for producing high quality and sustainably produced food.

We also need to create a policy framework to enable farmers to make choices to avail of new business diversification opportunities, in areas such as forestry, the bioeconomy and organic farming.

In addition, we need to focus on gathering an evidence base to support policy design in the area of land use. Ireland is currently a net emitter of emissions from our lands. We need to reverse that trend and reward farmers for doing so. As well as developing the next Climate Action Plan, my Department together with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine are evaluating the potential climate contributions from land-use improvements, to develop a land-use strategy.

With the correct policy choices in the agri-food sector, we can reward farmers for sequestering carbon, restoring biodiversity, producing clean energy and improving water and air quality, while remaining profitable and competitive. This will offer opportunities to innovative enterprises which are sustainable in the long-term for Ireland and its workers.

Climate Change Policy

154. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the degree to which he expects to maximise carbon reduction efforts and at the same time ensure that the agri-food sector does not become a victim; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61942/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 commits Ireland to a legally binding target of net-zero greenhouse gas emissions no later than 2050, and a reduction of 51% by 2030.

In order to deliver upon this ambition, the Government recently published the Climate Action Plan 2021. The Plan sets out indicative ranges of emissions reductions for each sector of the economy based on their respective starting points, and the relative difficulty, cost, speed, and benefits, of reducing emissions. The ranges will be converted to legally binding specific

sectoral ceilings following the adoption of economy-wide carbon budgets by Government and the Oireachtas in early 2022. The Plan also sets out the actions needed to deliver on our climate targets, across all economic sectors, including the agriculture sector.

In the agriculture sector, we must focus on a number of key areas. We must support and help our farmers to continue to roll out improvements in our farming practices. This is appropriate from both a consumer point of view, and from a financial perspective, as higher efficiencies often mean less costs. It is important Ireland maintains our reputation for producing high quality and sustainably produced food.

We also need to create a policy framework to enable farmers to make choices to avail of new business diversification opportunities, in areas such as forestry, the bioeconomy and organic farming.

In addition, we need to focus on gathering an evidence base to support policy design in the area of land use. Ireland is currently a net emitter of emissions from our lands. We need to reverse that trend and reward farmers for doing so. As well as developing the next Climate Action Plan, my Department together with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine are evaluating the potential climate contributions from land-use improvements, to develop a land-use strategy.

With the correct policy choices in the agri-food sector, we can reward farmers for sequestering carbon, restoring biodiversity, producing clean energy and improving water and air quality, while remaining profitable and competitive.

Climate Change Policy

155. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which his Department's proposals for carbon reduction here continue to align with the efforts of other European countries both within and without the European Union; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61943/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): International cooperation is essential to effective climate action. Ireland will continue to work alongside our EU colleagues and countries outside the EU to accelerate climate action and ambition to deliver on the goals of the Paris Agreement. The 'Glasgow Climate Pact', while reflecting a compromise of positions and adopted by consensus of all Parties concerned, keeps alive the ambition of restricting global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees. Focus must now turn to ensuring real emission reductions by 2030. In this regard, I welcome the work programme adopted in the COP26 Decision aimed to cut emissions in this decade.

The EU will play its part and aims to be climate-neutral by 2050. This objective is at the heart of the European Green Deal and in line with the EU's commitment to global climate action under the Paris Agreement. The EU and its Member States, acting jointly, submitted an updated Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) to the UNFCCC on 17 December 2020, which confirmed a commitment to a binding target of a net domestic reduction of at least 55% in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 compared to 1990. Legislative proposals to implement the new EU 2030 target have been presented by the European Commission in their "Fit for 55" package, and additional effort will be asked of all Member States, including Ireland.

Ireland has welcomed and supports the increased EU ambition. It is consistent with the national approach, as the Government is committed to achieve net zero emissions by no later than 2050 and a 51% emissions reduction by 2030. These commitments have now been given legal

force by the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021.

Climate Change Policy

156. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which all trees, hedgerows and undergrowth are used in the calculation of Ireland's plan to meet carbon reduction targets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61944/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Greenhouse gas emissions and removals associated with land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF) are reported in Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions inventory prepared by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and submitted annually to the EU and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Forestry, croplands, grasslands, wetlands, settlements and other lands are included in the LULUCF category.

Emissions and removals from hedgerows and non-forest woodland/trees, as landscape features within cropland, grassland and other land use categories, form part of the estimates for the LULUCF category.

A challenge for greenhouse gas emissions inventories is the quantification of the carbon in the above and below ground biomass for hedgerows and non-forest woodland/tress. To address the challenge, my Department through the EPA research programme is co-funding (together with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine) project "Farm-Carbon – Farm Hedgerows and Non-forest Woodland Carbon". An objective of this project is to advance the understanding of the contribution of hedgerows and non-forest woodland to carbon stocks in agricultural landscapes, and to identify approaches to maintain and enhance this contribution.

Climate Change Policy

157. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which sufficient credit is given to the business and farming sector in respect of their efforts to meet carbon reduction targets; if new incentives are under consideration in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61945/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): The provision of telecommunication services, including mobile phone and broadband services, is a matter for the relevant service providers operating in a fully liberalised market regulated by the Commission for Communication Regulation (ComReg), as independent Regulator.

Obligations in relation to mobile coverage are set out in licences granted by ComReg to the mobile operators and ComReg advises that the current minimum coverage obligations are being exceeded considerably by all operators. ComReg is currently managing the next spectrum award process for wireless broadband services and commissioned studies and technical reports to inform its approach to the award process and the consideration of appropriate coverage and rollout obligations in that context. These studies are available at www.comreg.ie

In relation to mobile coverage, ComReg has developed a national outdoor coverage map (available at this link), which can help consumers choose the network provider that best meets their needs for where they live, work and travel. ComReg has also published the results of tests

carried out on mobile/smartphone handsets currently available in Ireland (available at this link). These findings will further allow consumers to make informed decisions based on the handsets which best address their needs.

Since 2016, the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce has been a driving force for improving access to telecommunications services nationwide. It has completed over 70 targeted actions to alleviate connectivity barriers, and continues to tackle issues impeding the rollout of essential infrastructure. The Taskforce will continue its work in the context of its inclusion in the Programme for Government, in ensuring access to high quality telecommunications connectivity across Ireland to support social and economic development.

Climate Change Policy

158. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which he and his Department remain satisfied regarding the progress towards achieving best practice in terms of provisions made or in course thereof in the context of climate change; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61946/21]

160. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the degree to which he and his Department continue to examine policies to mitigate the impact of climate change on the economy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61948/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 158 and 160 together.

The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 (the Act), enacted in July 2021, significantly strengthens Ireland's overarching climate governance framework and embeds a process of carbon budgeting, including sectoral emissions ceilings. The plans and strategies established on a statutory footing under the Act will require that policies are put in place to ensure carbon budget ceilings are not breached. Putting these requirements in legislation places a clear obligation on this and future governments for sustained climate action.

The Climate Change Advisory Council (CCAC) has recently proposed its initial carbon budget programme comprising three consecutive five-year economy-wide carbon budgets for the periods 2021-2025 and 2026-2030, and a provisional budget for 2031-2035. Not less than 12 months prior to the expiry of each carbon budget the Advisory Council shall prepare and submit to me, or my successor(s), a proposed carbon budget in respect of the period following the third such budget in the carbon budget programme. In this manner, the carbon budget framework will support long-term planning and policy continuity, but similarly ensure that budgets and policies are developed in accordance with the most up-to-date scientific evidence.

The Act explicitly provides for evolution in national climate policy in line with developments in scientific evidence and best practice. When preparing the annual Climate Action Plan and National Long-Term strategy which set out the practical policies and measures that we must implement to achieve our national climate objective, the Minister for Climate Action is required under the Act to account for the relevant scientific or technical advice and any recommendations or advice of the Advisory Council. Furthermore, the Act specifically provides for "the fact that the means of achieving a climate neutral economy and other measures to enable the State to pursue the national climate objective may not yet be fully identified and may evolve over time through innovation, evolving scientific consensus and emerging technologies".

We have introduced an ambitious and robust best practice climate action framework, which

will enable Ireland to continue to develop and implement effective climate action policy, now and into the future, in line with our national climate objective.

Question No. 159 answered with Question No. 151.

Question No. 160 answered with Question No. 158.

Question No. 161 answered with Question No. 151.

Climate Change Policy

162. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which his Department can look forward to achieving a higher than anticipated carbon reduction measures without negatively impacting on the economy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61950/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Acts 2015 to 2021, commit Ireland to achieve a climate neutral economy by no later than 2050, and provide for a 51% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 compared to 2018 levels. The significantly strengthened legally binding framework under the Acts, with clear targets and commitments set in law, will help ensure that Ireland achieves its climate goals and obligations in the near and long-term.

To deliver upon the ambition set out in the Acts, the Government published Climate Action Plan 2021 in November. The 2021 Plan identifies the actions necessary to achieve our emissions reductions targets for each sector of the economy, based on their respective starting points, and the relative difficulty, costs, speed, and benefits, of reducing emissions. The recently announced €165 billion National Development Plan (NDP) has been designed to ensure it supports the Government's climate ambitions. For the first time in Ireland, climate and environmental assessment of the NDP measures has been undertaken, along with an assessment of the alignment of the NDP as a whole with the principle of a green recovery.

Far from negatively impacting the economy, embracing and properly managing this necessary transition, including in the areas the retrofitting and renewable energy sector, the circular economy, clean mobility, green and blue infrastructure, sustainable agriculture and the bio-economy, will create high quality employment opportunities that will be a source of significant employment growth over the coming decades, as well as supporting a stable tax base.

In fact the reality we face is that failure to rapidly move to a carbon-neutral economic model will have far reaching negative impacts on the economy and the public finances; undermine the long-term, sustainable competitiveness of the economy; and lock Ireland into a redundant fossil-fuel based economic model. This will cause the most significant disruptions to the Irish economy that have ever been experienced, and will certainly strain all of our Governmental and societal structures, resulting in significant cost and inequitable outcomes.

Energy Production

163. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which waste to energy enterprises are currently in operation and are anticipated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61951/21]

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

tions (Deputy Ossian Smyth): There are currently 2 waste to energy plants in operation in Ireland. In addition, three cement kilns accept solid recovered fuel (SRF) derived from waste for co-incineration at their plants. Further details are available from the Environmental Protection Agency at the following link:

National waste statistics | Environmental Protection Agency (epa.ie)

I understand that a number of other facilities are in the process of seeking planning and licensing approval from the relevant statutory authorities.

Renewable Energy Generation

164. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent of wind-driven electricity generation to develop to the level anticipated in the course of the next ten years; if this is to include on or offshore proposals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61953/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Currently, over 4.5 GW of renewable generation is connected to the electricity grid. The Government's ambition to deliver renewable electricity is set out in the recently published Climate Action Plan.

The indicative electricity capacity targets outlined in the Plan envisage up to 8 GW of onshore wind (including the already installed capacity), at least 5 GW of offshore wind and between 1.5 – 2.5 solar PV capacity by 2030. This will be achieved primarily through regular competitive auctions under the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS). The second onshore auction is already underway and a consultation on the terms and conditions for the first offshore auction under the Scheme closed last week.

Telecommunications Infrastructure

165. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which all areas throughout the country can expect to rely on a modern and or updated mobile telephone service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61954/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): The provision of telecommunication services, including mobile phone and broadband services, is a matter for the relevant service providers operating in a fully liberalised market regulated by the Commission for Communication Regulation (ComReg), as independent Regulator.

Obligations in relation to mobile coverage are set out in licences granted by ComReg to the mobile operators and ComReg advises that the current minimum coverage obligations are being exceeded considerably by all operators. ComReg is currently managing the next spectrum award process for wireless broadband services and commissioned studies and technical reports to inform its approach to the award process and the consideration of appropriate coverage and rollout obligations in that context. These studies are available at www.comreg.ie.

In relation to mobile coverage, ComReg has developed a national outdoor coverage map (available at this link), which can help consumers choose the network provider that best meets their needs for where they live, work and travel. ComReg has also published the results of tests

carried out on mobile/smartphone handsets currently available in Ireland (available at this link). These findings will further allow consumers to make informed decisions based on the handsets which best address their needs.

Since 2016, the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce has been a driving force for improving access to telecommunications services nationwide. It has completed over 70 targeted actions to alleviate connectivity barriers, and continues to tackle issues impeding the rollout of essential infrastructure. The Taskforce will continue its work in the context of its inclusion in the Programme for Government, in ensuring access to high quality telecommunications connectivity across Ireland to support social and economic development..

National Broadband Plan

166. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the efforts being made to ensure the provision of reliable high speed broadband to industrial hubs throughout the country in order to address communication deficiencies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61955/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): As set out in the Programme for Government, ensuring access to high-quality internet connections for people across Ireland is essential to the development of all parts of our country, socially and economically. Facilitating remote working and innovation opportunities is essential for addressing climate change, adapting in an evolving economy, and competing internationally. A combination of commercial investment and the State led National Broadband Plan intervention will ensure access to high speed broadband in every part of the country no matter how remote.

National Broadband Plan

167. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of broadband connection points installed in County Kildare in the past two years to date; the number of installations planned over the next 12 months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61956/21]

168. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which broadband blackspots throughout County Kildare have been identified and remedied over the past two years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61957/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): I propose to take Questions Nos. 167 and 168 together.

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 some 679 schools ensuring that no premises is left behind no matter how remote the location.

In July 2019, in order to finalise the mapping exercise required under the State Aid Guidelines on Broadband and to ensure the NBP High Speed Broadband Map was up to date, my Department conducted a consultation in relation to the High Speed Broadband Map. This

consultation sought submissions from operators who wished to have their existing high speed broadband networks or plans to invest in high speed broadband networks over the following 7 years to be included on the Department's High Speed Broadband Map. The Map shows the areas targeted by commercial operators to provide high speed broadband services and the areas included in the State Intervention Area under the National Broadband Plan. The High Speed Broadband Map is available at www.broadband.gov.ie and is colour coded and searchable by address and Eircode. The map indicates those premises that are in the AMBER area and will be served by the new high speed broadband network being delivered by NBI on behalf of the State and those in the BLUE area that will be served by commercial operators.

Despite the unprecedented challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, National Broadband Ireland has made steady progress on delivery of the new high speed fibre broadband network under the National Broadband Plan with over 282,000 premises surveyed or with survey underway across all counties and almost 150,000 premises with build currently underway or complete. NBI has advised that almost 35,000 premises are available to order and pre-order across 13 counties as of 3 December. I am advised by NBI that, over 7,000 premises in County Kildare have now been surveyed. Surveys are complete in the Deployment Areas of Curragh Camp and Donedea covering areas including Suncroft, Kildare, Pollardstown, Rathbride, Martinstown, Johnstown, Curryhills, Allenwood North, Downings North and Brockagh. I am further advised that over 3,000 premises in County Kildare currently have build underway as part of the Blessington, Carlow and Dunboune/Clonee Deployment Areas.

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

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. As of 3 December, 424 BCP sites have been installed by NBI across the country and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible sites and the Department of Education for schools. BCP locations in each county were selected in conjunction with the Broadband Officer in each Local Authority, in order to find the appropriate mix of locations to reap the maximum benefits. There are 3 BCP sites installed and connected in County Kildare at Crookstown Further Education and Training and Community Centre, Lullymore Heritage Park and Bigstone Community Hall. Further details can be found at nbi.ie/bcp-map. I am advised that no further public BCPs are planned for Co Kildare at this time but it is worth noting that Kildare already has a significant number of hubs that fall outside the Intervention Area.

My Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise schools with no high speed broadband, within the Intervention Area, for connection over the term of the NBP. In this regard, an acceleration of this aspect of the National Broadband Plan was announced in December which will see some 679 primary schools connected to high speed broadband by 2022, well ahead of the original target delivery timeframe of 2026. Saint David's National School and Rathmore National School in County Kildare were included as part of this initiative and have since been connected. Scoil Náisiúnta Cill Cae, Scoil Náisiúnta Na Cloi-

che Moire, Killashee National School, Churchtown National School, Scoil Náisiúnta Naomh Iopseh, North Kildare Educate Together School, St Anne's National School and Kilberry National School are due to be connected in the coming months. Further details are available on the NBI website at nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/

Question No. 168 answered with Question No. 167.

Electricity Generation

169. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which electricity generation and production costs here are in line with those in other EU member states; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61958/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): While this data is not routinely compiled by Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU), I have asked them to engage with the Deputy on the matter.

Under the Electricity Regulation Act, the CRU is directly responsible for the performance of its functions to a Joint Committee of the Oireachtas, and not to me as Minister. The Deputy may wish to note that CRU provide a dedicated email address for Oireachtas members, which enables them raise questions directly to CRU at oireachtas@cru.ie for timely direct reply.

National Broadband Plan

170. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of plans to fast-track the National Broadband Plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61965/21]

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 679 schools.

Despite the unprecedented challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, NBI has made steady progress on delivery of the new high speed fibre broadband network under the National Broadband Plan with almost 35,000 premises available to order and pre-order across 13 counties (Carlow, Cavan, Clare, Cork, Galway, Kerry, Limerick, Louth, Monaghan, Roscommon, Tipperary, Wexford and Wicklow). NBI has advised that over 282,000 premises in the Intervention Area across all counties have been surveyed and build work is underway for more than 120,000 premises, demonstrating the project is reaching scale.

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. My Department has worked closely with NBI to put in place a remedial plan under the Contract.

NBI has implemented a number of measures to help lessen the impact that these challenges have had on the rollout including:-

- Increasing the rate of pole replacement and duct remediation per month;

- Bringing in additional NBI resources;

- Earlier procurement of material used in the build stages; and

- Bringing in additional subcontractors

The focus for 2022 is to continue to deliver momentum in the build programme, catch up on the delays experienced and plan for acceleration. Final targets for 2022 are expected to be agreed early in the new year.

Question No. 171 answered with Question No. 149.

Climate Change Negotiations

172. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the discussions which he has had with the Just Transition Commissioner; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61967/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I refer to the reply to Question No. 30 on today's Order Paper (see below). The Government is committed to a just transition in the Midlands region and has dedicated significant funding to supporting workers, companies and communities affected by the closure of the peat-fired power stations and the end of peat harvesting by Bord na Móna.

As part of this commitment, the Just Transition Commissioner was appointed in November 2019 with the mandate to engage with those affected by the accelerated exit from peat for electricity generation, and to recommend to Government the essential elements of a just transition for those workers and communities. The Commissioner has made an important contribution to the Government's overall just transition response in the region, helping to facilitate dialogue, and bringing forward concerns from affected communities, residents, workers, and businesses.

The Government has responded to the Commissioner's recommendations by publishing an Implementation Plan for the Midlands Region, as part of the 2021 Climate Action Plan. The key responsibilities, steps and timelines to deliver the actions under this Implementation Plan will shortly be published as part of the Annex of Actions to the Climate Action Plan.

I have had various engagements with the Commissioner during 2021, most recently in July in a meeting with both the Taoiseach and Tánaiste. We have discussed a range of matters including the Department's proposed response to the Commissioner's recommendations in his progress reports, progress with the delivery of funding into the region, and the Commissioner's work for the remainder of 2021. In addition, the work of the Commissioner continues to be supported by my Department on an ongoing basis.

As I have noted previously, given the significant progress that has already been achieved, the Government does not propose to continue the Commissioner's term beyond the end of his current mandate which concludes at the end of this year. I look forward to receiving the Commissioner's final report and recommendations and being further briefed by the Commissioner at that stage.

The Midlands Regional Transition Team, which is convened by the Midlands Local Authorities, continues to provide an important forum for the Local Authorities, State Agencies and others to coordinate their ongoing work and to engage with Government in relation to just transition in the region. My Department will continue to engage with and support the work of this group into the future as the Midlands Implementation Plan is delivered.

Question No. 173 answered with Question No. 81.

Question No. 174 answered with Question No. 147.

North-South Interconnector

175. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the position regarding the review commissioned by his Department in respect of the proposed north-south interconnector project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62008/21]

176. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the widespread concerns of communities in counties Cavan, Monaghan and Meath are taken into account in decisions regarding the proposed north-south interconnector project; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that local authorities, reflective of the views of local communities are very strongly of the opinion that undergrounding is the only acceptable way that this project can be delivered as outlined in correspondence to his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62009/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 175 and 176 together.

The North-South Interconnector is critical to improving the efficient operation of the all-island Integrated Single Electricity Market and increasing security of electricity supply in Ireland and Northern Ireland. It will also facilitate the achievement of the goal to generate up to 80% of our electricity from renewable sources by 2030. A resilient and well-connected energy infrastructure is vital for Ireland's economic well-being and the ability to respond to the future needs of energy consumers.

The option of undergrounding the North-South Interconnector has been comprehensively assessed on several occasions. Most recently, the key finding from the International Expert Commission's report of October 2018 was that an overhead line remains the most appropriate option for this critical electricity infrastructure.

Notwithstanding this, I decided to commission a further short review to assess if the overall finding from the 2018 report remains valid. The terms of reference for this study were published on my Department's website on 21 April. On 7 May, my Department initiated a procurement process to appoint an independent expert to undertake the review. International consultants were subsequently engaged and their work is well advanced at this stage. I expect the review will be completed shortly.

The system operators, EirGrid and ESB Networks, always seek to work in close collaboration with landowners and stakeholders in the delivery of electricity infrastructure. Both companies are engaging with those living closest to the route of the interconnector. EirGrid has already activated a variety of engagements locally, including the appointment of community liaison officers and a mobile information unit active in the area. I expect such engagements will assist in ensuring that communities are fully engaged in the delivery of the project as consented.

Question No. 176 answered with Question No. 175.

Pension Provisions

177. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Transport if he will examine an issue regarding the pension scheme for drivers (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61665/21]

193. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Transport if he has considered the recommendations made by the Pensions Authority regarding the pension scheme for Dublin Bus drivers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61646/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 177 and 193 together.

The CIÉ Group has two pension schemes, namely the Regular Wages Scheme ("RWS") and 1951 superannuation scheme ("1951 Scheme"), and issues in relation to CIÉ pension schemes are primarily a matter for the trustees of the schemes, the CIÉ Group and their employees.

In relation to the RWS (mainly frontline staff), CIÉ has prepared and submitted draft Statutory Instruments (SIs) to give effect to the proposed changes to the scheme. These changes involve significant amendments to the Scheme which are necessary in order to address the Minimum Funding Standard requirements under the Pensions Act. These changes have been agreed by the trustees of the schemes, the employees and the CIÉ Group following extensive and prolonged engagement between all parties.

There are a number of steps involved before an SI can be made, including the statutory consultation process. It is expected that the details of the SIs will be settled shortly and published thereafter as part of the consultation process. In this context, I would like to reassure the Deputies that my Department, in consultation with advisors in NewERA, are working on the draft SIs as expeditiously as possible.

Bus Éireann

178. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Transport the reason prison records of ex-prisoners that come under the Good Friday Agreement are being used to refuse employment by Bus Éireann; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61136/21]

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

This is an operational matter and responsibility for the qualifying criteria of employment rests with Bus Éireann. Accordingly, I have referred 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

179. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will provide ad-

ditional economic support to the aviation sector and those who are employed in it given the recent introduction of new Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61174/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): During the Covid crisis the aviation sector has benefited considerably from the suite of measures to support businesses across the economy, including but not limited to, a wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, a commercial rates waiver, deferred tax liabilities and the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme. It is estimated that Irish airports and airlines will have received approximately €440 million under these measures by the end of 2021.

Government recognises that Aviation makes significant direct and indirect contributions in the regions, providing for high quality jobs within the aviation sector as well as through the various ancillary services that are provided to airports, the airlines, and in the local economy.

Given this, in addition to these horizontal supports, over €165 million in aviation specific supports will have been allocated to Irish Airports this year, including PSO air services, by the end of 2021. €21.3 million was made available to Donegal, Ireland West and Kerry Airports under the Regional Airports Programme 2021-2025. A further €32.1 million was made available to Cork and Shannon Airports under a bespoke COVID-19 Regional State Airports Programme in 2021. This investment in our regional airports will ensure airport compliance with EU safety and security related obligations. The PSO Air Service between Donegal and Dublin and Kerry to Dublin (until Ryanair began operating the Kerry route in July) was also supported by Exchequer funding

Furthermore, it was recognised in the National Economic Recovery Plan that additional support may be required to support the aviation sector's recovery as European and international air transport resumed. Given this, by end 2021 a further €116 million will have been distributed under a Covid Supplementary Support Scheme to our airports. Funding under this Scheme will compensate our smaller regional airports for the damage caused to them by Covid, as well as providing our State airports with flexibility to roll out route incentives/charge rebates with a view to supporting recovery and growth of connectivity.

In 2022, funding of €36 million will be provided by Government under the Regional Airports Programme 2021-2025, supporting regional airports of Shannon, Cork, Ireland West, Donegal and Kerry. This budget allocation represents a significant increase in funding available under the Programme in 2022 which takes account of the broadening of the Programme to include Shannon and Cork Airports.

Government is fully cognisant of the ongoing and deep impact of the pandemic on the aviation sector. This level of funding provided to date, clearly demonstrates Government's commitment to this sector and to those whose livelihoods have been so negatively impacted by this crisis. As was the case in 2021, Government will continue to keep Aviation Supports under review in 2022.

Road Projects

180. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Transport the details of and reasons for the major overrun of costs in the M7 widening, Sallins bypass, Osberstown interchange to date (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61200/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The main design and construction elements of the Naas Bypass widening Scheme, the Osberstown Interchange and the Sallins By-

pass were implemented under one construction contract with three funding authorities involved - TII, the Department and Kildare County Council.

Kildare County Council, as the contracting authority, had overall responsibility for the implementation of the scheme and engagement with the contractor on the delivery of the various elements of the scheme.

The €85.5 million figure (excluding VAT) relates to a final account settlement recommended by the Standing Conciliator appointed under the terms of the construction contract after a lengthy conciliation process. The reasons this settlement exceeds the original construction contract price include the fact that the Public Works contract makes provision for compensation events and for additional works to be instructed. There were several instructions issued over the course of the works. Additionally, upgrading the existing M7 carriageway to 3 lanes during live traffic required significant traffic management and the project experienced multiple delays due to this challenge. Also, the Osberstown interchange and Sallins Bypass sections of the project involved the construction of a new interchange over live motorway traffic which created additional complexities. There were also accommodation works involving multiple stakeholders and alteration works by Statutory Undertakers and adapting to their required timelines caused unforeseen delays.

A number of disputes arose between the Council and the main contractor and while some disputes were resolved by means of the Contract Disputes Management Procedures, a significant number were referred to conciliation. Following an extensive process the Conciliator recommended a final account settlement agreement which was accepted by both parties to the Contract.

Public Transport

181. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport the steps he is taking to increase transport accessibility in public transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61241/21]

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

Under the Dublin Transport Authority Act 2008, the National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for promoting the development of an integrated, accessible public transport network.

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

Road Safety Authority

182. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Transport the steps he will take to resolve the situation in relation to driving instructors who are being denied access to basic facilities such as toilets and sanitation for a second year (details supplied) given that they are providing a vital service dealing with the current backlog of persons waiting for driving tests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61245/21]

186. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been

drawn to the fact that some RSA national test centres do not provide toilet or sanitation facilities for driving instructors; if he will take steps to address this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61299/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 182 and 186 together.

Operational arrangements at driving test centres are a matter for the Road Safety Authority (RSA).

I understand from the RSA that prior to the COVID 19 pandemic some test centres across the country offered toilet facilities, and in some cases indoor waiting rooms, where instructors or other accompanying persons could choose to wait while students were out undergoing their test.

To be clear, some test centres around the country are very small and do not have, and have never had, facilities available for accompanying persons.

At present, toilet facilities at test centres are only available to the learner driver who is undertaking his or her driving test. There are no waiting area facilities available in any of the centres for either the learner or the instructor. The learner is contacted by phone while he or she is outside the centre and is then invited inside by the driver tester.

The decision to close public toilet and waiting facilities has been taken by the Road Safety Authority in the interests of public safety and as part of its overall Covid 19 Resumption of Services Protocols and in line with Health and Safety risk assessment procedures which had to be adopted as part of the RSA's resumption plans.

Allowing additional persons to enter the test centre would mean potentially doubling the number of attendees at any given time. The only way to do this without risk to public health would be to reduce the number of tests being provided. In a situation where the RSA is already working to reduced backlogs built up during the pandemic, this would not be in the public interest.

National Transport Authority

183. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Transport the amount of income that was taken in by the National Transport Authority from public transport providers (details supplied) in 2020 as compared with 2021; and the amount of subvention that was required to sustain same. [61260/21]

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

Following the establishment of the National Transport Authority (NTA) in December 2009, the NTA has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public transport services by way of public services obligation (PSO) contracts, in respect of services that are socially necessary but commercially unviable. It also has responsibility for allocating PSO Exchequer funding to eligible public transport providers.

I have, therefore, 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.

Public Transport

184. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Transport the use which is made of surplus fares paid on Dublin Bus and public transport in general; and the amount of surplus fares that was paid by consumers to transport providers by individual operator from 2016 to 2020, in tabular form. [61267/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, the day-to-day management and operational aspects of public transport (including the use of surplus fares) are the responsibility of the individual operator.

As surplus fares refers to excess cash payments that arise where change is not given, it is a question for Dublin Bus who are the only operator with exact fares. Accordingly, I have forwarded the Deputy's question to Dublin Bus for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Road Tolls

185. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Transport the income derived in tolls from the M50 toll bridge from 2016 to 2020, inclusive; and if information in relation to a series of matters (details supplied) will be provided in relation to same in tabular form. [61269/21]

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

With regard to the payment mechanism associated with toll operations, it is a contractual obligation which incorporates a traffic guarantee mechanism. Therefore, the contracts for the privately-operated toll schemes are commercial agreements between TII and the Public Private Partnership (PPP) concessionaires concerned.

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

Question No. 186 answered with Question No. 182.

Rail Network

187. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to a document prepared by Iarnród Éireann which states that Iarnród Éireann could return the Wexford-Waterford rail line for approximately €12 to €15 million; the plans that are in place for the use of the rail line; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61315/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I am not specifically aware of the document the Deputy refers to, however there are often a wide range of costs ascribed to re-openings

of any disused railway line.

As the Deputy may be aware, my Department, in co-operation with the Department for Infrastructure (Northern Ireland), is undertaking a *Strategic Rail Review* which will inform the development of the railway sector on the Island of Ireland over the period to 2040. Arup consultants have been appointed and it is expected to take 12 months to complete.

The *Strategic Rail Review* will review the rail network with regard to a number of ambitions including the potential afforded by disused and closed lines such as the Waterford to Rosslare line.

This will be one of the most significant reviews of the rail network on the island in many years and will provide a framework to develop a much-improved rail network in the years ahead. As part of the scope of the *Review*, a consultation process is now underway and I would encourage all interested parties to participate.

Public Transport

188. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the funding allocation for public transport in Budget 2021 and Budget 2022, respectively by current and capital funding in tabular form. [61527/21]

189. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the total allocation for public transport in Budget 2022, by current and capital funding; and the accompanying project list to which these allocations are assigned in tabular form. [61528/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 188 and 189 together.

Funding allocations for 2021 and 2022 are set out each year in tabular form in the Revised Estimates for Public Services which is available to view on

The relevant subheads for 2021 are B7 Public Service - The Revised Estimates Volumes for the Public Service (www.gov.ie). Service Provision Payments and B8 Sustainable Mobility Investment Programme, while for 2022 the relevant subheads will be B4 Public Service Provision Payments and B5 Public Transport Investment and A3 Active Travel.

Public Service Provision Payments relates to the Public Service Obligation (PSO) payments to public transport operators.

Capital funding in 2021 was allocated to the following programmes: accessibility retrofit programme; active travel programme; bus programme; heavy rail investment; infrastructure manager multi-annual contract (heavy rail); light rail (Luas and Metro); and the ticketing and technology programme.

Capital funding in 2022 will be allocated to the following programmes: accessibility retrofit programme; bus programme; heavy rail investment; infrastructure manager multi-annual contract (heavy rail); light rail (Luas and Metro); and the ticketing and technology programme and the Active Travel Programme under Subhead A3.

Question No. 189 answered with Question No. 188.

Rail Network

190. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the cost and timeframe for delivery regarding the replacement of the Dublin Belfast Enterprise train fleet. [61529/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy may know, the purchase of replacement and additional fleet for the Dublin - Belfast Enterprise service is part of the draft *PEACE PLUS* programme as submitted to the European Commission. The draft programme has been approved by the Government, Northern Ireland Executive and the North South Ministerial Council and submitted to the European Commission for final consideration and approval with a formal launch expected in 2022.

In terms of overall timing, the *PEACE PLUS* programme extends to 2027 and the draft programme proposes an allocation of €165million toward the Enterprise project. However, the total overall costs and timeframes for the project are in the early stages of development by both Iarnród Éireann and Translink and will be refined further in due course. It is to be expected that the total costs of the project will be in excess of the €165million likely to be available through the *PEACE PLUS* programme and will therefore fall to be considered by the Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. This was factored into my Department's considerations as the *National Development Plan* was developed.

The objective of the project is to enhance passenger experience on the Enterprise and allow the service move toward an hourly frequency in the future.

Electric Vehicles

191. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the total allocation for electric vehicles in Budget 2021 and Budget 2022, respectively by current and capital funding in tabular form. [61530/21]

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

The Government has already committed significant funding to support low emitting vehicles through the National Development Plan, which currently includes an allocation of almost €500 million for the period 2021-2025 and additional support from the Climate Action Fund.

Budget 2021

Responsibility for electric vehicle policy transferred to my Department in 2021 along with the EV programme allocation which can be broken down as follows:

Capital	Current
€36,500,000	€600,000

In addition, my Department allocated €15m to support the uptake of electric vehicles, in the taxi, hackney and limousine sector via the eSPSV grant scheme in 2021.

Scheme	Budget Allocation (Capital)
eSPSV grant scheme	€15,000,000

In addition, an alternatively fuelled heavy-duty vehicle grant scheme was launched earlier

this year to encourage operators in making the move towards more environmentally friendly models. €3m has been committed to this scheme with further funding to become available in 2022.

The Electric Vehicle Toll Incentive Scheme was launched in 2018 to encourage private car commuters who regularly use tolled roads to consider switching to an EV. Under the Scheme, BEVs and PHEVs qualify for 50% and 25% toll reductions respectively up to a maximum €500 annual threshold for private vehicles and €1,000 for commercial vehicles. The Scheme received €2m in funding in 2021 and it will continue to be funded in 2022.

Budget 2022

€100m has been allocated in 2022 to ensure the continued transition to electric vehicles. This is an almost doubling of the provision made available in 2021 and underpins the Government's commitment to making electric vehicles accessible to all. This funding will continue to incentivise the switch to electric vehicles as well as enabling the expansion of a fast and rapid electric vehicle charging network to stay ahead of demand.

Preparations are underway to establish an appropriately staffed and resourced Office of Low Emission Vehicles. Dedicated funding will be allocated to the OLEV as a part of the funds allocated to supporting a switch to electric vehicles in 2022.

Ports Policy

192. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the works contained in respect of the completion of investments at Dublin Port, the Port of Cork and Shannon Foynes Port as contained in the National Development Plan; the funding allocated to such works; and the years that this investment is to be delivered upon in tabular form. [61533/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): In line with National Ports Policy, State-owned commercial ports operate without any State financial support and derives all their income from commercial operations. Additionally, all capital expenditure projects must be funded without recourse to the Exchequer. Therefore all investment outlined in the table below is non-Exchequer spend. However, the ports are in receipt of funding under the Connecting Europe Facility for these projects as they are on the Ten-T network.

Company	Project	Works	Delivery Date
Port of Cork	Ringaskiddy Redevelopment	The development at Ringaskiddy will see the port over time relocate its business from the current city centre Tivoli location and the City Quays to a new facility at Ringaskiddy. It will enable the Company to future proof the Port as an international gateway for trade and will allow it to continue to meet the needs of its customers and the economic developmental needs locally and at regional and national level. The development is estimated to cost over €86 million including €50 million infrastructure and €18 million superstructure (cranes/straddle carriers). The construction work is complete with commissioning works currently underway. Facility to be operational in the first half of 2022.	2022
Dublin Port	Masterplan	A review of the port's Masterplan was published in 2018. As a result of that review, Dublin Port Company is now projecting a spend of some €1.6bn over the period 2010 - 2040. This covers the three Strategic Infrastructure Development (SID) projects: (1) Alexander Basin Redevelopment (ABR), (2) Masterplan 2 (MP2) and (3) the Third & Final Masterplan project (3FM) needed to deliver the full vision of the Masterplan.	
Dublin Port	- ABRAlexandra Basin Redevelopment	Construction on the ABR project is underway.In addition to providing additional cargo handling capacity, the ABR Project contributes to the future proofing of port facilities through the accommodation of larger sized vessels both in terms of length and draft of vessels. The developments include the deepening and extension of existing quay walls, the provision of a new 250 metres long Ro-Ro jetty together with two new Ro-Ro berths within the inner basin, infill of the basin at berths 52/53, the construction of a new river berth and dredging of the navigational channel to a depth of 10m below chart datum. Construction works will be largely complete by 2026 with the exception of completion of the dredging Programme.	2026

Company	Project	Works	Delivery Date
Dublin Port	- MP2	In July 2020, An Bord Pleanála granted a 15 year planning permission for the MP2 Project, the second of the three SIDs required to deliver Masterplan 2040. This permission will allow the construction of two berths with an overall length of 545m for Lo-Lo container ships and two berths with a combined length of 572m for Ro-Ro ferries. The project will include the redevelopment of one of the existing oil jetties to provide an additional berth for container ships as and when the demand for fossil fuels permanently reduces in response to national climate change policies.Works envisaged under the MP2 Project are currently being planned and construction on the first elements is expected to commence in 2022. Project completion is estimated at 2030.	2030
Dublin Port	- 3FM	The 3FM Project is the third and final strategic infrastructure development project to be brought forward under the Masterplan. This project provides for the redevelopment of port lands and facilities on the Poolbeg Peninsula. The project is at the pre-planning phase and it is intended to lodge a planning application with An Bord Pleanála in early 2023.	2030-2035
Shannon Foynes Port Company (SFPC)	Capacity Extension Works	SFPC's Infrastructure Development Programme (overall programme costed at c. €50m over seven years) is well underway. The investment programme will improve international connectivity through the construction of new quays walls and associated port infrastructure. The first part of the Jetty expansion programme has been completed. The next part will comprising the projects below:-Joining of the East and West jetty:Once foreshore consents are in place, it is envisaged the main works will commence in Q1 2022. Reclamation of intertidal mudflats:The procurement process for the main works contractors is underway. It is envisaged construction will commence in Q2 2022. All projects are expected to be completed by end 2023.	Q4 2023

Question No. 193 answered with Question No. 177.

Greenways Provision

194. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department or Transport Infrastructure Ireland are taking over the completion or progression of a project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61749/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for overall policy and exchequer funding in relation to Greenways. The planning, design and construction of individual Greenways is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), in conjunction with the local authorities concerned, it will be vital that any proposed Greenway have the support of the relevant Local Authority as funding is only provided by TII to Local Authorities. This is also subject to the Public Spending Code and the necessary statutory approvals. In this context, TII is best placed to advise you on the status of this project.

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

Rail Network

195. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Transport further to Parliamentary Question No. 183 of 7 December 2021, the expected deliver date for the DART extension to Drogheda; and if he will provide an approximate timeline for the project. [61842/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As described in the answer previously provided, DART+ is a programme comprising five separate but complementary projects which are at differing stages of development. Of those five projects, two – DART+ Fleet and DART+ Coastal North – are of particular relevance to the current Northern Line.

This week, following Government approval, Iarnród Éireann has signed a new ten-year framework with Alstom to provide new trains for DART. This DART+ Fleet project will benefit the current Northern Line as 65 of the 95 units ordered this week are for delivery to the Northern Line and will enter service by 2025. These new DART trains will bring Northern Line passengers a greater level of comfort and accessibility than existing fleet and also mean a consistent use of DART fleet across the Northern Line to Drogheda by 2025.

In relation to the overhead electrification as part of DART+ Coastal North, the next significant milestone in that project is next year's launch of the non-statutory public consultation process. That process will inform the overall development of the project. Once the non-statutory public consultation process has been completed I would expect the DART+ Coastal North project to be submitted for Decision Gate 1 approval under the *Public Spending Code*, just as the DART+ West project was recently submitted and approved by Government. I look forward to seeing citizens and public representatives input into those non-statutory consultation processes next year.

Ultimately cost and schedule estimates for DART+ Coastal North will not be set until Decision Gate 3 stage and the focus at the moment is on the consultation processes next year and also welcoming the new DART+ Fleet to the Northern Line by 2025.

Driver Licences

196. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport if he will examine the current costs incurred by citizens over the age of 70 in renewing their driving licence for a three year period (details supplied); if he will consider a reduction in the licence fee for over 70s given the frequency with which they must renew and give consideration to the additional medical expenses which must be met as part of the renewal process. [61853/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): The fee for a 10 year driving licence is currently €55. Driving licences for people aged 70 and over are free of charge. There are no plans to subsidise costs incurred in meeting the requirements for applying for a driving licence.

Departmental Reviews

197. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Transport the way the members of the steering committee on the Strategic Rail Review were selected; the name and occupation of the chair; and the members of the committee. [61923/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As is standard in such circumstances, the High Level Steering Group for the All Island Strategic Rail Review consists of senior representatives from relevant bodies, albeit in this case it also reflects the all-island aspect of the Review.

It is chaired at Assistant Secretary level from my Department and comprises representatives from -

- Department of Transport;

- Department for Infrastructure (Northern Ireland);

- Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage;

- Commission for Rail Regulation;

- National Transport Authority;

- Iarnród Éireann; and

- Translink (Northern Ireland).

My Department has also engaged JASPERS, an agency of the EU / EIB, as its technical advisers on the Review.

Bus Services

198. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Transport if a commitment will be made to implement the full plan on BusConnects and in particular the infrastructure for connectivity of Chapelizod village; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61933/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The *National Development Plan* states that construction of the BusConnects Core Bus Corridors is expected to be substantially complete in all five cities by 2030, with BusConnects Dublin the most advanced of all the BusConnects programmes.

The next milestone in relation to BusConnects Dublin is Government approval of the Preliminary Business Case under Decision Gate 1 of the *Public Spending Code*. The Preliminary Business Case for the BusConnects programme has been submitted to my Department for review and I will bring it to Government for its decision during Q1 2022.

Government approval at Decision Gate 1 will permit the National Transport Authority submit planning applications to An Bord Pleanála in relation to the Core Bus Corridors and the first of those planning applications is expected to be submitted upon receipt of Government approval.

As the Deputy is aware, BusConnects Dublin consists of a number of different elements and alongside the Core Bus Corridors the BusConnects Network Redesign is the next most significant of those elements. Roll-out of the new network has already commenced with the launch earlier this year of the H-Spine (Malahide/Howth to City Centre) and, more recently, the C-Spine (Maynooth/Leixlip/Lucan to Ringsend), which of course includes Chapelizod.

I can assure the Deputy that BusConnects Dublin is a key focus of our investment programme and I look forward to her continued support as the infrastructure and service improvements are delivered in the coming years.

Public Transport

199. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the National Transport Authority Connecting Ireland plan provides no public transport on R392 between Ballymahon, County Longford and Mullingar, County Westmeath; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61979/21]

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

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

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

The Deputy will be pleased to learn that Connecting Ireland proposes to expand the public transport network in rural areas specifically and to increase service levels. Under Connecting Ireland, the NTA proposes an overall increase of approximately 25% in rural bus services as part of the five year Connecting Ireland plan. As a result, 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, which ran from 2 November 2021 to 10 December 2021. I urged 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 referred the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Tax Code

200. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance if dental services are still VAT exempt including the costs of facilities and infrastructure incurred by a principal dentist; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61175/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The VAT treatment of the supply of goods and services is subject to the requirements of the EU VAT Directive, with which Irish VAT law must comply. Exemptions from VAT for certain activities in the public interest are set out in Chapter 2 of Title IX of the Directive. These provisions are transposed into Irish legislation in Part 1, Schedule 1, VAT Consolidation Act 2010. Paragraph 2(5) of Schedule 1 provides for an exemption in respect of the supply of professional dental services.

The exemption from VAT in respect of dental services is not dependent on the legal form of the taxable person supplying the service. It is the nature of the service that informs the VAT treatment. The legislation which transposes Article 132 of the Directive, and Revenue's interpretation of the legislation, ensures that the exemption from VAT to the supply of dental services is applied consistently and in a manner which is not dependent on the legal form of the person supplying the service. In accordance with the Directive and CJEU jurisprudence the VAT exemption applies to dental services provided by a clinic, a principal dentist, or by an associate dentist, where those services are provided to a patient.

Where a principal dentist receives consideration in respect of fee sharing arrangements and the nature of services consists of the supply of facilities for the carrying on of a dental practice, Revenue views this as a taxable supply of services within the scope of VAT. The final consumer in this fee sharing arrangement is not a patient availing of a supply of dental services to which the exemption applies.

Revenue has been clear at all times regarding the VAT treatment of dental fee sharing arrangements and has outlined its position in correspondence and meetings with the Irish Dental Association.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

201. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Finance if he will reassess his views on the employment wage subsidy scheme rates and revert to those rates of November 2021 in view of the impact of the CMO statements, of NPHET recommendations and subsequent Government restrictions and their consequences on November and December bookings and business in the hospitality, events and entertainment industry and as a consequence on the taxi and events related services and transport sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61178/21]

205. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Finance if he is considering the reintroduction of the employee wage subsidy scheme in view of the current restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61226/21]

207. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Finance if additional supports will be provided to those within the hospitality sector; if he and his colleagues in the appropriate Departments will consider measures (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61248/21]

211. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Finance if employment wage subsidy scheme employment supports will be restored for hospitality businesses to November 2021

levels; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61557/21]

218. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Finance if the employment wage subsidy scheme is not restored to pre-December 2021 rates or eligibility criteria are not changed, his views on whether a percentage of the employment wage subsidy scheme receipts from 2021 should be set against quarter 1 2022 to finance the increased labour costs being incurred (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61658/21]

221. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will reinstate the employment wage subsidy scheme on full rates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61686/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 201, 205, 207, 211, 218 and 221 together.

The objective of the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) is to support employment and maintain the link between the employer and employee insofar as is possible. The EWSS has been a key component of the Government's response to the Covid-19 crisis. It is an economy-wide scheme that operates across all sectors.

In money terms, the overall support provided to-date (9th December) by EWSS is over €6.6 billion comprising direct subsidy payments of almost €5.73 billion and PRSI forgone of €902 million to 51,700 employers in respect of over 696,900 employees.

The eligibility criteria for EWSS are based on self-assessment principles and the legislation provides that an employer must be able to demonstrate that his or her business will experience a 30% reduction in turnover or customer orders between 1 January and 31 December 2021, by reference to the corresponding period in 2019, as a result of business disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Following the agreement of Government on 3 December 2021, my Department and Revenue sought to develop a proposal to modify the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS) to provide for a supplementary subsidy (in addition to EWSS) for businesses which are subject to the latest restrictions on operating. The objective of the modified scheme was to provide targeted, timely and sector-specific support to supplement the reduced EWSS payments to the sector.

However, on further consideration and analysis of the data on CRSS, it proved to be administratively complex to design such a scheme and it would not be possible to have it operational ahead of Christmas as was hoped. The proposed modifications which included a change to both the turnover threshold and the rate, as well as consideration of a higher weekly cap, had the potential to significantly increase the cost of the scheme, particularly in the context of uncertainty around the trajectory of Covid-19 and the impact of the Omicron variant.

Instead, maintaining the enhanced rates of subsidy under the EWSS offers a relatively more efficient and effective way to support affected businesses in the immediate term. As such, the Government decided, and it was announced on Thursday last (9th December), that the enhanced rates of EWSS subsidy would apply for a further two months, December 2021 and January 2022. This will give certainty to businesses when they need it most.

The Government and I have been clear that there will be no cliff edge to supports for employers but we have also been clear that the EWSS cannot run indefinitely, nor is it sustainable to continue with the enhanced rates for a prolonged period of time given the very substantial costs to the Exchequer.

As such, from 1 February 2022, the original two-rate structure of €203 per week and €151.50

per week will apply; for March and April 2022 the flat rate subsidy of €100 per week will apply and the scheme will end on 30 April 2022.

The CRSS will remain in place to support businesses who are required to close or significantly restrict customers from accessing their business premises, and who meet the qualifying criteria. Under the relevant legislation, the CRSS was due to end on 31 December 2021 but is now being extended to the end of January 2022 under the same Government decision of 9 December as mentioned above. Provision is also being made to allow me, as Minister for Finance, to extend the CRSS up to 30 April 2022 by Ministerial Order if deemed necessary.

Amendment to the Finance Bill 2021 are being brought forward this week to give effect to the EWSS and CRSS changes mentioned.

Finally, as has been the case throughout the pandemic, the Government will continue to monitor developments closely.

Departmental Reviews

202. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Finance the gender diversity and make-up of the panel undertaking the recently announced retail banking review within his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61198/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Retail Banking Review is being undertaken directly by the Department of Finance, which has assigned a team in its Banking Division to the task. The team will consist of seven officials, To date, five Department officials and one of two officials being seconded from the Central Bank of Ireland have been assigned. The gender breakdown of the six officials is that two are female and four are male.

Tax Data

203. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance the revenue raised from the eight-year deemed disposal rule from 2016 to 2020, in tabular form; the expected annual cost of discontinuing the eight-year deemed disposal rule on collective investment funds; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61218/21]

204. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance his views on the concerns expressed by a person (details supplied) relating to the eight-year deemed disposal rule; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61219/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 203 and 204 together.

Finance Act 2000 introduced the gross roll-up taxation regime for investments in domestic funds (in section 58) and for investments in life policies (in section 53). While Finance Act 1990 had introduced anti-avoidance rules that are known as the "offshore funds" regime, Finance Act 2001 (section 72) amended the offshore funds regime to provide for gross roll-up in certain offshore funds that were similar to the Irish funds within the gross roll-up regime.

The general thrust of the regime is that there is no annual tax on income or gains arising within the investment. However, exit tax must be deducted on the occurrence of a "chargeable event". Exit tax applies to the profit element of each chargeable event, and chargeable events originally included –

- the making of relevant payments (which includes any dividend),

- the redemption of the investment, and

- the transfer by an investor of their investment.

Finance Act 2006 introduced the eight-year deemed disposal for all investments that benefited from gross roll-up: that is, investments in Irish funds, investments in life policies and investments in offshore funds that were similar to Irish funds. The eight-year deemed disposal was introduced as a new category of 'chargeable event' and is designed specifically to prevent the indefinite deferral of taxation.

In relation to a deemed disposal, the amount to which exit tax applies is the growth in value of the investment. When calculating the amount on which exit tax applies for a deemed disposal, any amounts already paid out as dividends are excluded. Any tax collected on a deemed disposal is available as a credit against any tax arising on a subsequent actual disposal.

Tax on chargeable events is returned to Revenue in three ways:

1. The majority of Irish funds will deduct what is known as "Investment Undertaking Tax", or IUT, on the happening of a chargeable event;

2. Irish life companies will deduct what is known as "Life Assurance Exit Tax", or LAET, on the happening of a chargeable event; and

3. Irish individuals account, through their Form 11, for exit tax on the happening of a chargeable event in respect of offshore funds and certain Irish funds that could not have deducted exit tax (such as Irish Exchange Traded Funds where the chargeable event is the sale of the share on a stock exchange).

I am informed by Revenue that they can identify the amounts of IUT, LAET and income tax accounted for in respect of chargeable events, but it is not possible to provide a breakdown of the tax as between the amount relating to the eight-year deemed disposal and the amount relating to the other types of chargeable events. Therefore, it is not possible to provide information on how much tax would be forgone if the eight-year deemed disposal was to be removed.

The table below provides an estimated amount of overall exit tax, including IUT, LAET and income tax on certain offshore investments.

Year	Investment Undertaking Tax	Life Assurance Exit Tax	Income Tax*	Total
€m	€m	€m	€m	€m
2020	121	124	**	245
2019	53	128	22***	203
2018	45	165	14	224
2017	40	184	20	244
2016	37	228	17	282

* The estimate of Income Tax is derived by multiplying the reported gains relating to Offshore Funds in Panel E, row 322, in Form 11 regarding Gains taxable at 41%

** 2020 income tax amounts are not yet available

*** 2019 income tax amount is provisional

Question No. 204 answered with Question No. 203.

Question No. 205 answered with Question No. 201.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

206. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Finance if he will review the eligibility criteria for entry to the employment wage subsidy scheme for businesses that started in late 2019 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61242/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Section 28B of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 provides for the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) which is an economy-wide enterprise support for eligible businesses. EWSS provides a subsidy to qualifying employers, based on the number of qualifying employees on the payroll.

As an economy-wide support, the EWSS has played a central role in supporting businesses, encouraging employment and helping to maintain the link between employers and employees since July 2020. To date (9 December 2021), payments of approximately €5.73 billion and PRSI credit of over €902 million have been granted to 51,700 employers in respect of some 696,900 workers.

The EWSS is operated on a self-assessment basis with the onus on applicants to satisfy themselves that they fully meet the eligibility criteria for the scheme as set down in the legislation and to self-declare to Revenue that they correctly qualify.

Generally, for pay dates on or between 1 July 2021 and 30 April 2022, to qualify for EWSS, a business must experience a minimum 30% reduction in turnover or customer orders in the period 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2021, due to Covid-19. A business must also have a valid tax clearance certificate.

The reference period for businesses that started trading prior to 1 January 2019, is 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2019. However, some businesses may have only commenced operations during 2019, therefore, the EWSS provides alternative reference periods for those businesses, with a view to ensuring that they would have the opportunity to qualify for the scheme.

The reference period for businesses that started trading between 1 January 2019 and 31 October 2019 is from their commencement date to 31 December 2019. For businesses that started trading on or after 1 November 2019, the reference period is the projected turnover or customer orders from 1 January 2021 (or when the business started, if later) to 31 December 2021, i.e. as if the pandemic had not occurred. The latter arrangement was put in place because no turnover, or relatively little turnover, in respect of 2019 exists, which should not be the case for businesses that were trading prior to 1 November 2019.

I am advised by Revenue that the business in question started trading in August 2019 and as such is required to compare its turnover or customer orders for the period August to December 2021 against the equivalent period in 2019 in respect of pay dates falling between 1 July 2021 and 30 April 2022. The information provided by the business to Revenue in respect of 2021 (to date) confirmed an increase in turnover, rather than any reduction, when compared to 2019, thereby rendering it ineligible for the EWSS for the period in question.

Finally, I am satisfied that the eligibility criteria for the EWSS, as provided for in the legislation, is sufficiently inclusive to cover the different scenarios that arise for businesses in fair

and reasonable manner for the majority of businesses and I have no current plans to review the eligibility criteria.

Question No. 207 answered with Question No. 201.

Tax Code

208. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Finance if he has examined the report by an organisation (details supplied) with regard to policies acting as disincentives to work for moderate to lower paid employees; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61268/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am aware of the report referred to by the Deputy in relation to an assessment by ISME of the effect of state policies on moderate to low income earners.

The report suggests policy changes in the following four areas:

1. Adjusting PRSI to eliminate the very high marginal PRSI rate on additional income in the PRSI Transition Zone from €18,304 to €22,048 per annum.

2. Set the basic rate for qualifying for the medical card at more than 30% above the comparable Jobseekers assistance rate.

3. Replace the child element in Jobseekers payments and all other welfare schemes by substantially increasing Child Benefit, phasing out Working Family Benefit, and at the same time making the Child Benefit taxable.

4. Significantly increase the income thresholds for access to social housing. Reform or remove the link between income and local authority rent.

I would note that the above recommendations are beyond my policy remit as the Minister for Finance and as such it would not be appropriate for me to comment directly on these findings. As the Deputy will be aware, my colleague Minister Humphreys and her Department are responsible for social welfare issues while my colleagues Minister Donnelly and Minister O'Brien have responsibility for medical cards and social housing, respectively.

In relation to the suggestion to make Child Benefit payments taxable, at present Child Benefit payments are exempt from tax under section 194 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997. I have no current plans to deviate from this position.

More generally in relation to the taxation of moderate to lower paid employees, I would draw the Deputy's attention to Budget 2022 income tax and USC measures. This included a substantial income tax package comprising of an increase of €50 in each of the main tax credits – personal tax credit, employee tax credit and the earned income credit – from €1,650 to €1,700. An increase of €1,500 in the income tax standard rate band for all earners was also announced. Further, the 2% rate band ceiling for USC will be increased for 2022 in line with the increase in the national minimum wage to ensure that a full-time adult worker who benefits from the increase in the hourly minimum wage rate of €10.20 to €10.50 will remain outside the top rates of USC. Further details can be located at the following link www.gov.ie/en/publication/7e491-taxation-measures/.

Revenue Commissioners

209. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance if funding will be made available in 2022 to purchase extra dogs for the dog unit of the Revenue Commissioners. [61287/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that it currently operates 24 Detector Dog Teams with arrangements in place to increase this to 28 Detector Dog Teams for early 2022. This is an increase of 14 dog teams over the last five years.

Revenue have advised that the aforementioned numbers will meet the anticipated operational needs in the immediate term. I am also advised by Revenue that the deployment of dog detector teams is a matter that is kept under regular review having regard to ongoing risk assessment and evolving operational needs and the broader deployment and use of detection equipment and technologies by Revenue.

Tax Credits

210. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Finance if consideration has been given to expanding the home carer tax allowance in limited circumstances (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61366/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that the home carer tax credit may be claimed by jointly assessed married persons or civil partners, where one spouse or civil partner (the 'home carer') cares for one or more dependent persons.

A dependent person includes an individual who, at any time in the year of assessment, is:

- a child in respect of whom the home carer, or his or her spouse or civil partner, is in receipt of child benefit;

- aged 65 years or over; or

- permanently incapacitated by reason of mental or physical infirmity.

The dependent person must normally reside with or in close proximity to the married couple or civil partners for the relevant year of assessment.

To obtain the full tax credit (€1,600 for the 2021 year of assessment), the home carer's income for the year must not exceed €7,200. Where the home carer's income is over €7,200, the tax credit available is reduced by one half of the excess amount earned over this limit. The home carer tax credit will therefore not be available for the 2021 year of assessment where the home carer's income exceeds €10,400.

A couple or civil partners cannot claim both the increased standard rate band for dual income couples and the home carer tax credit in the same year of assessment and in practice, Revenue will grant whichever relief will provide the most beneficial treatment to the couple. Where the home carer tax credit is no longer available, the increased standard rate band may therefore be applied.

Based on the details supplied, home carer relief is not available to the person concerned. However, I am also advised by Revenue that tax relief may be available in respect of qualifying tuition fees paid by an individual. This includes tuition fees paid for an approved third level education course, including a postgraduate course, at an approved college.

Relief is not available in respect of the first €3,000 paid per year of assessment for a full-

time course, or the first €1,500 paid per year of assessment for a part-time course. In addition, relief is not available in respect of administration fees, examination fees, capitation fees or any portion of tuition fees that are, or will be, met directly or indirectly by grant, scholarship, employer contribution or other means.

The Revenue office which deals with the individual's tax affairs will be able to assist in determining the full range of credits and reliefs which he or she may be entitled to claim, based on their personal circumstances. Contact details for various Revenue offices can be found at the link on the Revenue website www.revenue.ie/en/contact-us/index.aspx.

Detailed guidance in relation to the home carer tax credit and relief for tuition fees can be found on the Revenue website, which can be located at the links detailed below:

- home carer tax credit:

www.revenue.ie/en/personal-tax-credits-reliefs-and-exemptions/health-and-age/home-carer-credit/index.aspx, and

www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-15/15-01-29.pdf;

- relief for tuition fees

www.revenue.ie/en/personal-tax-credits-reliefs-and-exemptions/education/tuition-fees-paid-for-third-level-education/index.aspx.

Question No. 211 answered with Question No. 201.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

212. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Finance if hospitality businesses will be eligible in December 2021 to be given the opportunity to requalify for the employment wage subsidy scheme supports in January 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61558/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Section 28B of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 provides for the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) which is an economy-wide enterprise support for eligible businesses. EWSS provides a flat-rate subsidy to qualifying employers, based on the number of qualifying employees on the payroll.

As an economy-wide support, the EWSS has played a central role in supporting businesses, encouraging employment and helping to maintain the link between employers and employees since July 2020. To date (9 December 2021), payments of over €5.73 billion and PRSI credit of over €902 million have been granted to 51,700 employers in respect of some 696,900 workers.

The Finance (Covid-19 and Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2021, signed into law on 19 July, provided for the extension of EWSS to 31 December 2021. It also provided that for employers to be eligible for the EWSS, they must be able to demonstrate that their business will experience a 30% reduction in turnover or customer orders for the calendar year 2021 compared to the calendar year 2019 and that this disruption to normal business is caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As part of my Budget Day announcement I outlined that the EWSS will remain in place in

a graduated form until 30 April 2022. While the scheme will be closed to new employers from 1 January 2022, eligible employers who are availing of EWSS at 31 December 2021 will continue to be supported by the scheme, if they so choose, until 30 April 2022. Therefore, in relation to the Deputy's question, if hospitality businesses were eligible in December 2021, remain registered for EWSS and received EWSS payments, they will continue to qualify for the EWSS supports in January 2022. There is also the legislative requirement that employers must have a tax clearance certificate to be eligible to join the EWSS and, must continue to meet the requirements for tax clearance for the duration of the scheme.

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

To assist employers in conducting a monthly review of its continuing eligibility for the scheme, Revenue have provided an *EWSS Eligibility Review Form* through its Revenue Online Service (ROS). From 21 July 2021, completing and submitting an *EWSS Eligibility Review Form* to Revenue has been necessary to avail of EWSS supports, with details of an employer's monthly eligibility review check to be submitted by the 15th of the following month. For EWSS claims in 2022, the eligibility review undertaken on the last day of December 2021 will need to be completed and submitted to Revenue by 15 January 2022.

Finally, as announced on 9 December last, it has been decided to extend the enhanced rates of EWSS for the months of December 2021 and January 2022 to give certainty to businesses when they need it most and to help maintain the link between employers and employees in sectors adversely affected by the most recent public health restrictions. From 1 February 2022, the original two-rate structure of €203 per week and €151.50 per week will apply; for March and April 2022, a flat rate subsidy of €100 per week will apply and the scheme will end on 30 April 2022. These changes are being provided for in Finance Bill 2021.

The Government and I have been clear that there will be no cliff edge to supports for employers but we have also been clear that the EWSS cannot run indefinitely, nor is it sustainable to continue with the enhanced rates for a prolonged period of time given the very substantial costs to the Exchequer.

At the same time, as has been the case since the start of the pandemic, the Government will continue to monitor developments closely.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

213. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Finance if he will permit automatic qualification for the Covid restrictions support scheme in cases in which hospitality businesses qualify for the employment wage subsidy scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61559/21]

214. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Finance if he will apply a 30% revenue drop threshold for the Covid restrictions support scheme supports for hospitality businesses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61560/21]

215. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Finance if he will set the weekly cap on the Covid restrictions support scheme payments at €25,000 in order to ensure larger hospitality businesses are not disadvantaged by the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

[61561/21]

219. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Finance if he will remove the Covid restrictions support scheme limit of €5,000 per week; if the basis of calculation is 12% of 2019 turnover, then that full amount should be allowed given larger properties also incur larger costs and should therefore not have a limit imposed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61659/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 213 to 215, inclusive, and 219 together.

The Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS) is a targeted support for businesses significantly impacted by restrictions introduced by the Government under public health regulations to combat the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The support is available to companies, self-employed individuals and partnerships who carry on a trade or trading activities, the profits from which are chargeable to tax under Case I of Schedule D, from a business premises located in a region subject to Covid restrictions as set out in the relevant legislation.

To qualify under the scheme a business must, under specific terms of the Covid restrictions, be required to either prohibit or significantly restrict, customers from accessing their business premises to acquire goods or services, with the result that the business either has to temporarily close or to operate at a significantly reduced level. For the purposes of CRSS, a qualifying "business premises" is a building or other similar fixed physical structure in which a business activity is ordinarily carried on.

The CRSS applies to businesses carrying on trading activities from a business premises located in a region subject to restrictions, which requires the business to prohibit or considerably restrict customers from accessing their business premises and as a result, is operating at less than 25% of turnover in 2019.

It is not sufficient that the trade of a business has been impacted because of a reduction in customer demand as a consequence of Covid-19. The scheme only applies where, as a direct result of the specific terms of the Government restrictions, the business is required to either prohibit or significantly restrict access to its business premises.

The cash payment is 10% of the average weekly turnover of the business in 2019 up to €20,000 and 5% thereafter, subject to a maximum weekly payment of €5,000, for each week that the business is affected by the Covid restrictions.

With the easing of Covid restrictions in recent months many businesses are no longer significantly restricted from operating and therefore are no longer eligible for the CRSS. However, eligible businesses have been able to claim enhanced restart week payments to assist them with the costs of reopening. A total of €704m has been paid out under the CRSS in respect of 25,500 premises.

The public health restrictions currently in force, require nightclubs and discotheques to remain closed until 9 January 2022 and they will be eligible to receive the CRSS until then.

Under the relevant legislation, the CRSS was due to end on 31 December 2021 but is now being extended to the end of January 2022. Provision is also being made to allow the Minister to extend the CRSS up to 30 April 2022 by Ministerial order if deemed necessary.

Following the agreement of Government on 3 December 2021, my Department and Revenue sought to develop a proposal to modify the CRSS to provide for a supplementary subsidy (in addition to EWSS) for businesses which are subject to the latest restrictions on operating.

The objective of the modified scheme was to provide targeted, timely and sector-specific support to supplement the reduced EWSS payments to the sector.

However, on further consideration and analysis of the data on CRSS, it proved to be administratively complex to design such a scheme and it would not be possible to have it operational ahead of Christmas as was hoped. The proposed modifications which included a change to both the turnover threshold and the rate, as well as consideration of a higher weekly cap, had the potential to significantly increase the cost of the scheme, particularly in the context of uncertainly around the trajectory of Covid-19 and the impact of the Omicron variant.

Therefore a decision was taken that a restoration of the higher EWSS rate was a relatively more efficient and effective way to support businesses in the immediate term. The CRSS will remain in place to support businesses who are required to close or significantly restrict customers from accessing their business premises, and who meet the qualifying criteria.

I propose to introduce amendments to the Finance Bill 2021 to give effect to these changes in the Seanad this week.

Question No. 214 answered with Question No. 213.

Question No. 215 answered with Question No. 213.

Primary Medical Certificates

216. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Finance the status of the proposed review of the primary medical certificate system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61617/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Disabled Drivers & Disabled Passengers Scheme provides relief from Vehicle Registration Tax and VAT on the purchase and use of an adapted car, as well as an exemption from motor tax and an annual fuel grant.

The Scheme is open to severely and permanently disabled persons as a driver or as a passenger and also to certain charitable organisations. In order to qualify for relief, the applicant must hold a Primary Medical Certificate issued by the relevant Senior Area Medical Officer (SAMO) or a Board Medical Certificate issued by the Disabled Driver Medical Board of Appeal.

I have no role in relation to the granting or refusal of PMCs and the HSE and the Medical Board of Appeal must be independent in their clinical determinations.

Certain other qualifying criteria apply in relation to the vehicle, in particular that it must be specially constructed or adapted for use by the applicant.

To qualify for a Primary Medical Certificate an applicant must be permanently and severely disabled, and satisfy at least one of the following medical criteria, in order to obtain a Primary Medical Certificate:

- be wholly or almost wholly without the use of both legs;

- be wholly without the use of one leg and almost wholly without the use of the other leg such that the applicant is severely restricted as to movement of the lower limbs;

- be without both hands or without both arms;

- be without one or both legs;

- be wholly or almost wholly without the use of both hands or arms and wholly or almost wholly without the use of one leg;

- have the medical condition of dwarfism and have serious difficulties of movement of the lower limbs.

The current medical criteria medical criteria were included in the Finance Act 2020, by way of amendment to Section 92 of the Finance Act 1989. This amendment arises from legal advice in light of the June 2020 Supreme Court judgement that the medical criteria in secondary legislation was not deemed to be invalid, nevertheless it was found to be inconsistent with the mandate provided in Section 92 of the Finance Act 1989 (primary legislation).

As the Deputy will appreciate this Scheme confers substantial benefits to eligible persons and changing the medical criteria to more general mobility-focused criteria, would raise the already considerable cost of the Scheme in terms of tax foregone to the Exchequer. Any increase in the cost of the Scheme would require a concomitant increase in tax, reduction in public expenditure, or increase in the Exchequer deficit.

While I am very aware of the importance of this scheme to those who benefit from it, I am also aware of the disquiet expressed by members of this house and others in respect of the difficulties around access to the scheme.

Accordingly, I gave a commitment to the House that a comprehensive review of the scheme, to include a broader review of mobility supports for persons with disabilities, would be undertaken.

In this context I have been working with my Government colleague, Roderic O'Gorman, Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. We are both agreed that the review should be brought within the wider review that was commenced in March 2020 under the auspices of the National Disability Inclusion Strategy, to examine transport supports encompassing all Government funded transport and mobility schemes for people with disabilities. Its work was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Minister O'Gorman has confirmed that he has asked his officials to reconvene the working group established to carry out that review at the earliest opportunity and we are both agreed that this is the most appropriate forum for the review. With this in mind, officials from both my Department and Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth have met recently to discuss proposals for progressing the Disabled Drivers Scheme review within the wider review. My officials will continue to work closely with officials from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, to progress this review, and on foot of that will bring forward proposals for consideration.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

217. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Finance if the employment wage subsidy eligibility criteria for Q1 2022 should compare projected turnover against quarter 1 2019 and not 2021 versus 2019; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that cognisance should be made of the different set of circumstances that pertained in 2021; if his attention has been further drawn to the fact that quarter 1 is always the most difficult time of the year even in good trading times; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61656/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Section 28B of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 provides for the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) which is an economy-wide enterprise support for eligible businesses. EWSS

provides a subsidy to qualifying employers, based on the number of qualifying employees on the payroll.

As an economy-wide support, the EWSS has played a central role in supporting businesses, encouraging employment and helping to maintain the link between employers and employees since July 2020. To date (9 December 2021), payments of approximately €5.73 billion and PRSI credit of over €902 million have been granted to 51,700 employers in respect of some 696,900 workers.

The EWSS legislation provides that for employers to be eligible for the EWSS, they must be able to demonstrate that their business will experience a 30% reduction in turnover or customer orders for the calendar year 2021 compared to the calendar year 2019 and that this disruption to normal business is caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. I would also draw attention to the fact that, despite the exit from most public health restrictions during the summer, the eligibility criteria was not tightened in the Finance (Covid-19 and Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2021 which was enacted in the summer and which extended the scheme beyond end-June 2021. In fact, the reference period to which the metric must be applied was broadened out in the above Act to span a full year thus effectively relaxing the conditionality to qualify to benefit from the scheme in most cases.

Therefore, for most businesses, eligibility is determined by comparing the actual turnover or level of customer orders of the business for the calendar year 2021 with the turnover or level of customer orders of the business for the calendar year 2019. Many businesses were fully closed or limited in their capacity to trade due to the public health restrictions in place for the earlier months of 2021. This change in the EWSS assessment period meant that such businesses could generate the equivalent of up to 70% of their calendar year 2019 turnover or customer orders for the remainder of 2021 and still remain eligible to claim support under the scheme.

As the Deputy will be aware, as part of my Budget Day announcement I outlined that the EWSS will remain in place in a graduated form until 30 April 2022 and that there will be no changes to the eligibility review period. While the scheme will be closed to new employers from 1 January 2022, eligible employers who are availing of EWSS at 31 December 2021 will continue to be supported by the scheme, if they so choose, until 30 April 2022.

As announced on 9 December last, it has been decided to extend the enhanced rates of EWSS for the months of December 2021 and January 2022 to give certainty to businesses when they need it most and to help to maintain employer/employee links. From 1 February 2022, the original two-rate structure of €203 per week and €151.50 per week will apply; for March and April 2022 the flat rate subsidy of €100 per week will apply and the scheme will end on 30 April 2022.

As part of the deliberations associated with this most recent change, consideration was given to amending the reference period so that all businesses would have to demonstrate eligibility for EWSS in the period January to April 2022 by way of a 30% decrease in turnover compared with the same period in 2019. However, for a number of reasons, including the fact that such a change could have the effect of excluding certain businesses who, in line with my Budget Day announcement, might have otherwise expected to be eligible for EWSS and who have planned accordingly, such an approach was not proceeded with. Accordingly, I intend to follow the course outlined in Budget 2022, so that businesses who qualify for EWSS as at 31 December 2021 may continue to be supported by the scheme until 30 April 2022.

Question No. 218 answered with Question No. 201.

Question No. 219 answered with Question No. 213.

Tax Code

220. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Finance if he plans to apply a zero VAT rate on journalistic publications following the adoption of amendments to the European Union VAT directive at the December 2021 ECOFIN meeting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61660/21]

227. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Finance further to Parliamentary Question No. 332 of 15 June 2021, if the recent agreement at European Council level on new VAT rules would, when implemented, allow for zero rating on the rental of disability aids. [61843/21]

228. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Finance the additional flexibilities, including options to zero rate goods and services that serve a social purpose, the recent agreement at European Council level on new VAT rules would, when implemented, allow for; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61844/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 220, 227 and 228 together.

As the Deputies will be aware the Commission issued its original proposal to amend a Council directive on the common system of value added tax as regards rates of value added tax on 18 January 2018.

The compromise text agreed at ECOFIN has been amended significantly in comparison to the original proposal so the EU Parliament will once again be consulted for their opinion.

Once the Parliament has issued its opinion on the proposal, the Council will formally adopt the directive. It will then enter into force on the twentieth day following that of its publication in the Official Journal of the European Union.

Officials in my Department will be reviewing the options now available to Ireland in setting VAT rates.

Future tax changes are generally taken in the context of the Budget. Deputies will be aware that my officials prepare a series of papers containing tax options for the Tax Strategy Group to be considered in the context of the budgetary process, alongside a wide range of submissions from various stakeholders and lobby groups.

Question No. 221 answered with Question No. 201.

Disability Services

222. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Finance if he has read the recently published report by the Ombudsman entitled Grounded: Unequal access for people with disabilities to personal transport schemes, a commentary by the Ombudsman; his plans to address the issues raised in the report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61689/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am aware of the recent Ombudsman report and its findings, particularly in relation to the Disabled Drivers & Disabled Passengers Scheme, which provides relief from Vehicle Registration Tax and VAT on the purchase and use of an adapted car, as well as an exemption from motor tax and an annual fuel grant.

The Scheme is open to severely and permanently disabled persons as a driver or as a passen-

ger and also to certain charitable organisations. In order to qualify for relief, the applicant must hold a Primary Medical Certificate issued by the relevant Senior Area Medical Officer (SAMO) or a Board Medical Certificate issued by the Disabled Driver Medical Board of Appeal. Certain other qualifying criteria apply in relation to the vehicle, in particular that it must be specially constructed or adapted for use by the applicant.

To qualify for a Primary Medical Certificate an applicant must be permanently and severely disabled, and satisfy at least one of the following medical criteria, in order to obtain a Primary Medical Certificate:

- be wholly or almost wholly without the use of both legs;

- be wholly without the use of one leg and almost wholly without the use of the other leg such that the applicant is severely restricted as to movement of the lower limbs;

- be without both hands or without both arms;

- be without one or both legs;

- be wholly or almost wholly without the use of both hands or arms and wholly or almost wholly without the use of one leg;

- have the medical condition of dwarfism and have serious difficulties of movement of the lower limbs.

The current medical criteria medical criteria were included in the Finance Act 2020, by way of amendment to Section 92 of the Finance Act 1989. This amendment arises from legal advice in light of the June 2020 Supreme Court judgement that the medical criteria in secondary legislation was not deemed to be invalid, nevertheless it was found to be inconsistent with the mandate provided in Section 92 of the Finance Act 1989 (primary legislation).

As the Deputy will appreciate this Scheme confers substantial benefits to eligible persons and changing the medical criteria to more general mobility-focused criteria, would raise the already considerable cost of the Scheme in terms of tax foregone to the Exchequer. Any increase in the cost of the Scheme would require a concomitant increase in tax, reduction in public expenditure, or increase in the Exchequer deficit.

While I am very aware of the importance of this scheme to those who benefit from it, I am also aware of the disquiet expressed by members of this house and others in respect of the difficulties around access to the scheme. The Ombudsman report highlights many of these same issues.

Accordingly, I gave a commitment to the House that a comprehensive review of the scheme, to include a broader review of mobility supports for persons with disabilities, would be undertaken.

In this context I have been working with my Government colleague, Roderic O'Gorman, Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. We are both agreed that the review should be brought within the wider review that was commenced in March 2020 under the auspices of the National Disability Inclusion Strategy, to examine transport supports encompassing all Government funded transport and mobility schemes for people with disabilities. Its work was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Minister O'Gorman has confirmed that he has asked his officials to reconvene the working group established to carry out that review at the earliest opportunity and we are both agreed that this is the most appropriate forum for the review. With this in mind, officials from both my Department and Department of Children,

Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth have met recently to discuss proposals for progressing the Disabled Drivers Scheme review within the wider review. My officials will continue to work closely with officials from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, to progress this review, and on foot of that will bring forward proposals for consideration.

Tax Data

223. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Finance the total corporation tax receipts and the total tax receipts under all headings for each of the years 2010 to date in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61731/21]

224. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Finance if a portion of corporation tax receipts was ring-fenced for capital expenditure for 2015 to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61732/21]

225. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated proportion of corporation tax receipts which was spent on capital expenditure for 2015 to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61733/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 223 to 225, inclusive, together.

Corporation tax receipts are paid into the Central Fund along with other tax receipts. Issues from the Central Fund are used in the day-to-day running of the State and it is therefore not possible to link corporation tax revenue specifically to capital expenditure.

Tax revenue data is available from my Department's databank at databank.finance.gov.ie.

The tax receipts from 2010 to end-November 2021 are reproduced below for the Deputy's convenience.

Exchequer tax receipts, 2010 to end-November 2021, € thousands

[Exchequer Tax Receipts

Question No. 224 answered with Question No. 223.

Question No. 225 answered with Question No. 223.

Tax Code

226. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Finance if correspondence from a person (details supplied) in relation to VAT in an area will be reviewed; the action his Department is taking to reduce VAT in relation to the matter raised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61826/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that the VAT rating of goods and services is subject to the requirements of the EU VAT Directive with which Irish VAT law must comply. Under the EU VAT Directive and Irish VAT legislation the supply of building materials is liable to VAT at the standard rate, currently 23%. Member states are not permitted to apply a VAT rate lower than the standard rate to building materials. By way

of special derogation from the general rule, however, Ireland is permitted to continue its long-standing practice of applying a reduced rate, currently 13.5%, to the supply of ready-to-pour concrete and certain concrete blocks but there are strict restrictions on this derogation, including that the rate cannot be reduced below 12%.

On the suggestion of a VAT compensation mechanism for purchasers, I am advised by Revenue that this is generally contrary to the operation of VAT. It is for this reason that Ireland has not introduced any new VAT refund orders since the 1980's and any changes to VAT refunds since then have been either by EU requirement or making minor changes to existing orders.

As a general point of EU law, VAT is a tax on consumption and is applied to supplies being made by a person and not to supplies received by a person. For that reason, it is not permissible to apply different VAT rates to different customers. Therefore, it would not be possible to accept the proposal to apply a different rate of VAT to building materials supplied to particular categories of buyers, such as individual self-builders.

In relation to self-build properties, substantial support is already available through the tax system for first-time buyers, including those self-building their first home. The Help to Buy (HTB) incentive gives a refund of Income Tax and Deposit Interest Retention Tax (DIRT) paid in Ireland over the previous four years, subject to limits outlined in legislation. Section 477C Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 outlines the definitions and conditions that apply to the HTB scheme.

Finally, the Deputy has raised the matter of the VAT rate on new builds in Northern Ireland. When it was within the EU, the UK, by way of special derogation from the general rule, was permitted to continue its long-standing practice of applying a zero rate of VAT to the supply of certain residential buildings.

Question No. 227 answered with Question No. 220.

Question No. 228 answered with Question No. 220.

Tax Reliefs

229. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Finance when Dáil Éireann will be updated with full details of the extension following his recent announcement that the temporary Covid-19 waiver on transborder workers' relief will be extended. [61890/21]

230. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Finance when the Revenue Commissioners will issue updated guidance to transborder workers' relief following his announcement that the temporary Covid-19 waiver would be extended. [61891/21]

231. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Finance when Dáil Éireann will be updated on his recently announced extension to the temporary Covid-19 waiver on transborder workers' relief and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61892/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 229 to 231, inclusive, together.

Transborder Workers' Relief may apply in the case of an individual resident in the State but who commutes to his or her place of work outside the State. This relief is set out in section 825A of the Taxes Consolidation Act (TCA) 1997.

The relief effectively removes the foreign employment income from a liability to Irish tax

where foreign tax has been paid on that employment income. In simple terms, the effect of the measure is that Irish tax will only arise where the individual has income other than income from a foreign employment.

The relief applies subject to certain conditions, which include the requirement that the duties of a qualifying employment are performed wholly outside the State in a country with which Ireland has a Double Taxation Agreement. There is an exception in respect of merely incidental duties which may be performed in the State.

As the Deputy may be aware, the operation of this relieving measure is a matter for the Revenue Commissioners. Revenue understands that due to COVID-19, certain individuals whose duties of employment are normally performed outside the State, may be required to work from home in the State, which would result in them being ineligible for relief under Section 825A TCA 1997. In recognition of this, on 23 March 2020, Revenue issued updated guidance on the COVID-19 hub of its website and notified by eBrief No. 046/20, to provide for a concession in respect of this relief as follows - "*where employees are required to work from home in the State due to COVID-19, such days spent working at home in the State will not preclude an individual from being entitled to claim this relief, provided all other conditions of the relief are met. For example, the employment income must be fully subject to non-refundable foreign tax*." This concession initially applied in respect of the 2020 tax year and was later extended (on 21 December 2020) to the 2021 tax year.

Revenue continues to regularly review all COVID-19 related matters and, provided all other conditions of the relief are met, Revenue's temporary concession will be further extended into 2022, for the period that public health measures require employees to work from home.

The COVID-19 concessional treatment is only relevant to those individuals whose employment enables them to perform their duties from home. Certain service type employments requiring in-person attendance at the workplace would not fall into this category and as such, these individuals would presumably not seek to claim the concession, as they would already qualify for the relief.

Further guidance on the relief and the extension of the concession in 2022 may be found in Tax and Duty Manual www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-34/index.aspx - Transborder Workers' Relief.

I am aware that there have been calls to place this concessional treatment on a statutory footing so that individuals who are resident in the State but work outside the State for a non-resident employer can continue to avail of the relief if they exercise their duties of employment in the State.

During the debates on Finance Bill 2020, I undertook that this matter would be examined as part of the work of the Tax Strategy Group (TSG) for 2021. The resultant paper was discussed by the TSG as part of its deliberations on 8 September last. The examination encompassed very detailed consideration of all relevant matters including the equity of treatment between Irish residents who pay tax in the State, the competitive position of Irish employers and the established principles of international tax. The review identified a number of significant concerns from a policy perspective when having regard to the interest of the wider body of taxpayers encompassing Irish resident employees and employers. The full TSG paper (TSG Paper 21/04) can be located here - www.gov.ie/en/collection/d6bc7-budget-2022-tax-strategy-group-papers/.

This matter was discussed at both the Committee and Report Stages of Finance Bill 2021 in Dáil Éireann and, in fact, it was during the Report Stage debate that I informed the House

of Revenue's proposed extension of the temporary concessionary treatment into next year as already mentioned. I and my Department continue to monitor the issue having regard to the comprehensive review carried out under the auspices of the TSG and the fundamental points which the TSG paper raises.

The Deputy may also wish to note that Ireland is exceptional in having a domestic relief such as Transborder Workers' Relief. There is no comparable measure in the United Kingdom nor in many countries in mainland Europe that share land borders.

Question No. 230 answered with Question No. 229.

Question No. 231 answered with Question No. 229.

Fiscal Policy

232. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to implement recommendations (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61900/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Under the Ministers and Secretaries (Amendment) Act 2013 there is a requirement each year for Government to agree an overall Government Expenditure Ceiling for each of the following 3 years, to allocate this into Ministerial Expenditure Ceilings and then to inform Dáil Éireann.

To comply with this requirement, in line with the approach taken in 2021, expenditure ceilings for 2022 were provided in the 2022 Expenditure Report and indicative technical expenditure ceilings for 2023 and 2024 will be laid before the Dáil before the end of this month. The overall amounts to be included in these ceilings will be consistent with those agreed under the medium term expenditure strategy set out in the Summer Economic Statement (SES) which laid out overall ceilings for the period to 2025.

The SES set out the Government's reformed medium-term fiscal architecture, which anchors budgetary policy via an expenditure rule whereby core expenditure growth will be kept in line with the trend growth rate of the economy.

The objective of this rule is to de-couple expenditure policy from cyclical variations in the economy and from windfall tax revenue. In its *Fiscal Assessment Report*, the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council welcomed this innovation to Ireland's fiscal framework. I further note the Council's view that the Government's fiscal stance for next year strikes the appropriate balance between continuing to provide the necessary fiscal support to the economy while returning the public finances to a sustainable trajectory.

Finally, I have noted the Council's recommendation in relation to the Government's expenditure rule and I will take this advice under consideration.

I will formally respond to the *Fiscal Assessment Report* in the coming weeks.

Tax Code

233. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Finance further to the recent report by the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, the way he intends to address the Government's continued over-reliance on corporation tax receipts, in which one in five euro of tax receipts were from corporation tax in 2020 and more than half of those receipts were from ten corporate groups;

and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61904/21]

234. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Finance if he intends to heed the advice of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council with regard to a matter (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61905/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 233 and 234 together.

Corporation tax receipts recorded strong growth throughout the pandemic, increasing by almost €950 million last year to reach €11.8 billion, which was, at the time, the highest level on record. As of November this year, corporation tax receipts stood at €13.6 billion.

These receipts are welcome, and a reflection of the success of our industrial policy in attracting high-quality firms to Ireland. There is evidence that, in particular, the pharmaceutical and ICT sectors have contributed to the record level of receipts received over the last two years. The continued strength in corporation tax revenues means that we are borrowing less than would otherwise be the case.

However, as I have stated on many occasions, corporation tax receipts are subject to exceptional volatility and unpredictability because, as the Deputy notes, receipts are vulnerable to the business decisions of a relatively small number of large, multinational firms, with the top ten payers accounting for more than half of all receipts in 2020.

Additionally, Government is planning for changes to the international tax environment which may impact upon revenues. Despite the recent clarity offered by Ireland signing up to the political agreement at the OECD Inclusive Framework, at this point it is too early to make any determination on the net costs or otherwise of implementation. There are numerous issues that remain to be addressed, negotiated and resolved at OECD and EU level, as well as within signatory countries.

Given the absence of such relevant information, Budget 2022 forecasts maintained the previous assumption of a €2 billion net loss in corporate tax receipts by 2025 relative to baseline. This assumption will, of course, be kept under constant review and amended as appropriate as negotiations continue.

The volatility and unpredictability of corporation tax receipts underlies the importance of the medium-term framework set out in the *Summer Economic Statement*, which anchors budgetary policy via an expenditure rule. Keeping core spending growth in line with the trend growth rate of the economy will help ensure that expenditure policy is de-coupled from windfall tax revenue, such as any potential over-performance in corporation tax receipts in the years ahead. This will assist in reducing the over-reliance on corporation tax receipts going forward.

Finally, I have noted the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council's recommendation in its *Fiscal Assessment Report* in relation to the Rainy day fund and I will take this advice under consideration.

I will formally respond to the *Fiscal Assessment Report* in the coming weeks.

Question No. 234 answered with Question No. 233.

Energy Prices

235. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider, in the absence of a reduction in VAT on domestic energy sources including gas and home heating oil,

a discount scheme for low and middle income households that would then be reimbursed to providers in a similar manner to the operation of the free electricity allowance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61995/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The final retail price of fuel is determined by a number of factors which include the costs of production, distribution, global market factors, international exchange rates, taxation, wholesale market contracts as well as individual retail pricing policies. The current spike in energy prices arises principally from the global recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic in conjunction with supply constraint issues and is being witnessed across the European Union as well as many other regions.

Wholesale electricity prices both in Ireland and across Europe have risen substantially in 2021, with high international gas prices, low levels of wind, increasing carbon prices (Emissions Trading System), a lingering 2020 winter, low gas storage reserves and gas supply issues in Europe all contributing to rising wholesale electricity prices.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Government today approved the establishment of the Electricity Costs Emergency Benefit Scheme under which a payment of €100 will be made to each domestic electricity customer as a once off measure to mitigate the effects of the unprecedented rise in electricity prices on domestic electricity customers.

Separately, with regard to home heating fuels and taxation, the Deputy will be aware that a reduced rate of VAT applies to all home heating fuels. In relation to the Carbon Tax increase, I have delayed its application on home heating fuels until May 2022 to allow for the passage of the winter heating season. In addition, in line with Government policy, the additional revenues raised from the increase in carbon tax have been allocated to expenditure measures which ensure a just transition through targeted social welfare measures, investment in energy efficiency and through funding for the agricultural sector.

In light of the current upward trend in energy costs, an additional €174 million in carbon tax revenues is being made available to the Department of Social Protection in 2022, an increase of €105 million on the 2021 allocation of €69 million.

This package of welfare measures is informed by ESRI research which finds that the net impact of the measures is progressive. Analysis undertaken by the ESRI shows that as a result of this targeted policy approach, households in the bottom four income deciles will see all of the cost of the carbon tax increase offset, with the bottom three deciles being better off as a result of these measures. This is a tangible demonstration of the Government's commitment to achieving a Just Transition.

I would like to remind people that there are still very significant savings to be had by shopping around energy suppliers. I would also note that the most effective way to reduce a household's energy bills permanently is through improving the energy efficiency of their home. The Government is providing a record level of support for energy efficiency this year. This will continue in 2022 with further investment.

In the long run, the best way to protect Ireland from the impact of international fossil fuel prices is to reduce our dependence on them. We will achieve this through the progressive decarbonisation of Irish society and through the steps that will be taken to meet the Government's commitment to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

Energy Prices

236. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if he discussed the rising price of energy at the recent meeting of the Eurogroup; if he has analysed the support package announced by the Italian Government in September 2021 to support households from rising energy prices and the funds allocated to extend that protection into 2022; if he discussed those measures with his Italian counterpart; if he will consider delivering a similar package; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61996/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): At Eurogroup meetings, we have had a number of discussions on energy prices and inflation to which Finance Ministers from many Member States have contributed. The outcomes of Eurogroup discussions are communicated through the post Eurogroup press conferences and summing-up letters at:

www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/eurogroup/eurogroup-documents-register/.

While the euro area has performed extremely well and the outlook is positive, we are very alert to the recent rise in prices, much of which reflects energy price developments. In fact, I invited the Director of the EU Agency for the Coordination of Energy Regulators (ACER), Christian Zinglersen, into our October Eurogroup meeting to discuss energy prices. At our most recent meeting in December, it is still firmly our view that the rise in prices is temporary and that inflation will ease in 2022.

In relation to the Government's response to rising energy prices, in Budget 2022 the Minster for Public Expenditure and Reform announced a range of measures to tackle the rise in prices. These measures included increases to the fuel allowance as well as core welfare rates, which were also designed to counteract the impact of the carbon tax on low income households. The specific measures were:

- An increase to the Qualified Child Payment of €2 per week for children under 12 and €3 per week for children over 12, which will protect low income families and reduce child poverty.

- An increase in the Living Alone Allowance of €3 per week as people living alone are likely to have higher energy needs than average.

- An increase to the Fuel Allowance of €5 per week to compensate a broad range of lower income households. This is combined with a broadening of the threshold for Fuel Allowance eligibility and an increase in the income allowed for the means test that is applied to applicants.

- An increase in the income threshold for the Working Family Payment of €10 per week.

The total cost of these interventions is projected at €146 million in 2022. Cumulatively, these measures will protect the most vulnerable but I would re-iterate the views of the European Institutions and the International Monetary Fund that the recent spike in prices is transitory.

Public Procurement Contracts

237. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the process underway by the Office of Government Procurement in relation to a new framework for the procurement of cloud video conference services; the expected date for the publication of this framework; the timelines for premarket engagement and evaluation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61231/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): OGP is currently engaging with its public sector clients in relation to their requirements for cloud services

(including collaboration and video conference services) which will inform OGP's future strategy in relation to potential procurement solutions for cloud services. Any procurement of cloud services will be through public a competition(s) advertised on www.etender.ie. Pre-market engagement relating to any public procurement competition will be conducted in an open and transparent manner through a Request for Information process advertised on www.etenders.ie. Pre-market engagement will not commence until Q1 2022 at the earliest.

Brexit Supports

238. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans and proposals to ensure that farmers receive direct funding from the Brexit Adjustment Reserve; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61322/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): Ireland will receive just over €1 billion from the EU's Brexit Adjustment Reserve, the biggest single allocation for any Member State, representing just over 20% of the total funding available.

Approximately 80% of funding will be paid to Member States as pre-financing in three tranches over the period 2021 to 2023. I am pleased that on 6 December 2021 the European Commission approved the payment of Ireland's first tranche of €361.5 million, making us the first Member State to receive such approval.

The purpose of the Reserve is to help counter the adverse economic and social consequences of Brexit in the sectors and Member States that are worst affected. In Ireland's case, funding will be directed at areas such as enterprise supports; supports for the agri-food and fisheries sectors, reskilling and retraining; and checks and controls at our ports and airports.

To qualify for BAR funding, expenditure must be incurred between 1 January 2020 and 31 December 2023 and a direct link to the adverse consequences of the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU must be demonstrated.

The allocation of BAR resources is being aligned with the annual Estimates process, which has been the vehicle for allocating Brexit resources since the UK Referendum in 2016.

Departmental Funding

239. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the reason he is discontinuing funding to an organisation (details supplied); if he will reconsider the decision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61678/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) has provided grant funding to Benefacts since 2015. The project was funded as a pathfinder initiative in the area of data analytics on the non-profit sector. Benefacts was initially co-funded with philanthropy, however in recent years the Department has been providing the majority of funding to the entity.

In 2019, DPER received an independent report which it commissioned to provide analysis of the market for data on the non-profit sector. This report examined, inter alia, issues around the demand for the data concerned; methodologies and technologies used; the potential for direct provision by the State of these services itself, and; the maturity of the market to provide these services efficiently. On foot of this report, DPER undertook a review in 2020 which found that the business case for its continued funding of Benefacts was no longer justified and accord-

ingly the decision was made to terminate funding. This decision was notified to the Chairperson of the Board of Benefacts and other relevant stakeholders in June 2020.

Recognising that other public service bodies with direct policy involvement in the not-for-profit sector may have wished to consider whether they had an appreciable business case to continue funding Benefacts, my Department agreed to fund the initiative up to the end of 2021. This provision was made to facilitate relevant public service bodies to consider their position and to assess all of the options in relation to their respective business needs concerning data on the not-for-profit sector.

In April 2021, my Department reaffirmed its 2020 decision to all of the parties concerned. Furthermore, in acknowledgment of the impact of Covid19 on this deliberative process, DPER sanctioned a final three month extension of funding to Benefacts up to the 31st March 2022. As of December 2021, no alternative funding source from among the Departments and agencies who directly avail of the service provided by Benefacts has been identified.

The factors influencing the original decision of April 2020 have not changed materially and, consequently, the decision of this Department to terminate funding remains unaltered.

My officials are continuing to work closely with the executive and Board of Benefacts to ensure that all necessary requirements under the funding agreement will be met, including those which may arise under a wind-up scenario.

Public Procurement Contracts

240. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the details of a tender issued for the provision of chairpersons of Government initiated reviews or bodies. [61700/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I am not aware of any tender issued by my Department for the provision of chairpersons of Government initiated reviews or bodies.

Fiscal Policy

241. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to implement recommendations (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61901/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The Summer Economic Statement (SES) set out the Government's medium term fiscal strategy which anchors budgetary policy by keeping core expenditure growth in line with the trend growth rate of the economy.

The objective of this rule is to de-couple expenditure policy from cyclical variations in the economy and from windfall tax revenue. In its *Fiscal Assessment Report*, the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council welcomed this innovation to Ireland's fiscal framework. I further note the Council's view that the Government's fiscal stance for next year strikes the appropriate balance between continuing to provide the necessary fiscal support to the economy while returning the public finances to a sustainable trajectory.

I note the Council's comments in relation to Departmental expenditure ceilings in respect of

current expenditure not being published beyond 2022. In line with last year's Budget, technical current expenditure ceilings for 2023 and 2024 will be published before the end of the year, with the final ceilings for these years being fixed as part of the estimates process in the respective years, within the overall expenditure parameters set out in the SES and Expenditure Report 2022. This approach reflects the need to consider in Estimates settlements the unwinding of Covid-19 related expenditure and the allocation of funding from the Brexit Adjustment Reserve.

As usual with the *Fiscal Assessment Report*. The Minister for Finance will formally respond in the coming weeks.

Fiscal Policy

242. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the way major budgetary commitments in relation to Sláintecare fit into his plans for future public expenditure given Sláintecare costings have not been updated since 2017; the projected future costings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61902/21]

243. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the way budgetary commitments in relation to climate actions fit into his plans for future public expenditure given there is no estimate for the budgetary cost of implementing the climate action plan as indicated by the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61903/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I propose to take Questions Nos. 242 and 243 together.

Budget 2022 followed the medium term expenditure strategy laid out in the Summer Economic Statement, which set a sustainable rate of growth for core expenditure in the period to 2025. This will see core expenditure grow each year by just over 5 per cent on average over the period to 2025, broadly in line with the trend growth rate of the economy. The average annual growth rate in current expenditure is just under 4¾ per cent with total capital spending, including that funded by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, growing by an annual average of over 8½ per cent.

This strategy sees an annual average of €3.2 billion being made available for increases in core current expenditure over the period 2022 to 2024. This includes a provision of 3% of the core current expenditure base in respect of existing level of service costs with the balance in funding being available for priority new current expenditure measures.

The increases in core capital spending, consistent with the amounts set out under the revised National Development Plan, will see increases ranging between €0.8 to €1.1 billion in the period from 2022 to 2024.

In looking at the Health expenditure, it is important to take into account the additional funding allocated in Budget 2021 and Budget 2022. Core current expenditure of €20.4 billion is provided in 2022 for the Department of Health, an increase of €2.9 billion compared to the amount set out in the pre-Covid Revised Estimates Volume for 2020. This has allowed for significant funding to be allocated to new measures including for additional staffing and capacity improvements, with Sláintecare measures being budgeted as part of the new measures allocation to the Department of Health.

As outlined, there are significant increases provided for capital investment. The revised National Development Plan set new five year rolling Departmental capital allocations and overall

ten year capital ceilings out to 2030. The NDP sets out a total public investment of €165 billion over the period 2021 to 2030. Looking at the Government's climate ambitions, extensive efforts have been made to ensure that the National Development Plan will support these ambitions.

The level of resources being set aside for core spending is significant - almost €93 billion in 2025 compared to just over €70 billion in 2020. This additional spending will provide for new expenditure measures, including for priorities such as Sláintecare and Climate Action, with allocations of the additional current funding being decided each year as part of the estimates process.

Question No. 243 answered with Question No. 242.

Houses of the Oireachtas Commission

244. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the process by which changes to remuneration for those employed under the scheme for secretarial assistance is decided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61934/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The Oireachtas Commission oversees the provision of services to the Houses and their Members by the Houses of the Oireachtas Service (the parliamentary administration) in accordance with the Commission Acts.

The primary functions of the Commission are to provide for the running of the Houses of the Oireachtas, to act as governing body of the Service, to consider and determine policy in relation to the Service and to oversee the implementation of that policy by the Secretary General.

The Scheme for Secretarial Assistance is the mechanism under which Secretarial Assistants and others are engaged. Under the Scheme, the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission has the power to regulate the provision of "secretarial facilities" to Members and "qualifying parties". Secretarial Assistants, Administrative Assistants, Parliamentary Assistants, Administrators and Chefs de Cabinet are employed by Members and by qualifying parties but are paid by the Commission.

The Commission also regulates the number of staff employed under the Scheme and has oversight of the operation of the Scheme. Under the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Act 2003, the Commission must obtain the consent of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform of the day before reaching an agreement with any person in relation to rates of pay, conditions of employment or superannuation rights.

In practice, this means that the Commission advises on matters relating to pay, superannuation or other terms and conditions of employment, and submits proposals to myself for consideration and consent.

In that regard, I am aware that there is a process underway at the Workplace Relations Commission dealing with various issues, including alignment with the current public service pay agreement '*Building Momentum',* between the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission and SIPTU.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

245. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht,

Sport and Media if the financial supports offered to SMEs in the hospitality and events sector will also apply to travel SMEs; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61183/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I understand the Deputy is referring to supports for travel agents. Fáilte Ireland administered an Ireland Based Inbound Agents Business Continuity Scheme of €10m in the final quarter of 2020. The overall purpose of the Scheme was to help Irish Based Inbound Agents to withstand the impact of COVID-19 by providing a direct financial contribution to support their business continuity plans.

Fáilte Ireland recently announced indicative details of how the €50m funding provided in Budget 2022 for the Tourism Business Continuity Programme will be allocated to assist strategic tourism businesses, including €11m - €13m for Strategic Ireland Based Inbound Agents who package, sell, and market Ireland's tourism product overseas. This scheme will open for applications on 12 January 2022 and Fáilte Ireland will hold an industry webinar on 6 January 2022 giving more details.

Travel agents also benefit from many of the Covid-19 horizontal supports provided by Government such as the EWSS and rates waiver.

Supports for Outbound Tour Agents come under the remit of my colleague, Eamon Ryan, Minister for Transport.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

246. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if her attention has been drawn to statistical information in relation to live performers (details supplied); the measures she is putting in place to support this sector following the latest round of restrictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61335/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I am fully aware of the severe difficulties being faced by live performers and all artists as a result of the pandemic and my Department and I have engaged extensively with stakeholders to understand these challenges and put in place supports for the sector. As the Deputy is aware, new necessary measures to protect public health were introduced from 7 December. This included certain restrictions on capacities for live indoor performance. These restrictions impact on the viability of live performances and in this context, Government recently extended supports under the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS) and the Employee Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) to protect employment in impacted sectors. The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) has also been reopened for a limited time to support people who lose their employment as a result of the new COVID-19 public health restrictions from Tuesday 7 December 2021.

I have also introduced €50m in sector specific supports, including a support for events that were due to take place in December and January to minimise cancellations and to provide support where these are unavoidable. The supports announced for the sector include:

- €5m for the seasonal musical theatre and pantomime scheme (LPSS 2), funding will increase from €2m to €5m and the turnover requirement is being reduced to €100,000 from €300,000 with applications being accepted until the end of January 2022. This scheme is now open for applications

- €20m for another strand of the Live Performance Support Scheme (LPSS 3), specifically

to support performances in December and January which may need to be cancelled, curtailed or rescheduled. This scheme will open for applications on Friday 17 December. Venues, including nightclubs that stage live performances, producers and promoters can apply for up to 50% of their eligible costs

- A minimum of €14m for another strand of the Live Performance Support Scheme (LPSS 4), to support performances being staged from February 2022 to June 2022. This scheme will open in January 2022. If further funds are required the Minister will seek additional funding from the Covid Contingency Fund

- €5m for Local Authorities to support local artists and performances through the LLPSS (Local Live Performance Support Scheme). This will include funding for community and local pantomimes

- €5m to continue the capital supports scheme (CECGS) to venues, including for ventilation upgrades and other COVID adaptations

- €1m for the Saint Patrick's Festival 2022

A further extension of the Music and Entertainment Business Assistance Scheme (MEBAS) which supports businesses in the music sector will be announced in January.

The rationale behind these schemes is to provide employment opportunities for artists, musicians and crew. Thousands of days of employment were generated by the LLPSS and the LPSS over the summer and autumn when other activity was restricted due to public health measures. I am confident that the new strands of the schemes will give much needed employment to musicians, artists and arts workers again, including in the nightclub sector.

I am committed to supporting the live performance and nightclub sector as they journey through this difficult phase and these schemes aim to be as flexible, responsive and timely as possible in that regard.

Sports Funding

247. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of an application by a club (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61369/21]

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

The scoring system and assessment procedures were published earlier this year and all applications are being assessed accordingly. Approximately one thousand of the submitted applications were for 'equipment-only' projects. These applications were assessed first and grants with a total value of €16.6m were announced on the 6th August. The associated letter of provisional allocation encouraged all grantees to draw down this funding before year-end if possible and accordingly my Department has been prioritising the payment of all existing grants. Ensuring that as many older grants as possible are paid before year-end will maximise the funding

available to allocate to the 2020 capital SCEP applications.

In relation to the 2020 / 2021 capital SCEP applications, which include an application from the club referenced by the Deputy, assessment work is continuing and every effort is being made to complete it as quickly as possible. Given the record number of applications received however, it is likely to take a further number of weeks to have these assessments fully complete with announcement of the final recommended allocations expected early in the New Year.

Tax Code

248. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if further consideration has been given to proposals made in 2016 for tax breaks to companies that support international athletes that work full-time; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61434/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): The Deputy will appreciate that any proposals regarding taxation policy are ultimately a matter for the Minister for Finance.

While there is no record in my Department of a proposal being received in 2016 on the specific issue of tax breaks for companies that support international athletes that work full-time, proposals were received in recent years regarding the operation of the tax relief scheme for donations to sport more generally.

The National Sports Policy 2018-2027 recognises the significant financial investment by individuals and businesses to support local sports clubs. This is a welcome funding source and the Government tries wherever possible to ensure an enabling environment for sporting bodies to further develop these funding opportunities.

On 29 November I published a Sports Action Plan for the period 2021 to 2023 which sets out the key initiatives that we are going to pursue on our continuing journey to get more people involved in sport and to enhance the way that sport is managed and administered.

With a planned doubling of investment in sport to an annual level of more than €220 million by 2027, the State intends to take the lead in delivering more investment but others will increasingly need to play their part through, for instance, corporate and philanthropic finance. Taxation reform can assist this drive for more funding diversity in Irish sport, not just for high performance sport but also for grassroots sport.

The Action Plan includes several actions relating to funding for sport, including Actions 3.4 and 3.7.

Action 3.4 commits to the introduction of a scheme for the attraction of corporate and philanthropic finance to support Ireland's high-performance programme, modelled on the "Black Gold" programme in New Zealand.

Action 3.7 commits to the preparation of business cases for possible taxation reform for (a) the granting of charitable status for NGBs (b) the lowering of the €250 eligibility threshold for capital reliefs on individual donations to sports capital projects (c) the extension of the zero-rated VAT regime (d) the extension of taxation reliefs on capital donations to include donations for sports participation/coaching programmes, and (e) the incentivisation of personal exercise opportunities.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

249. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if members of the artistic community in receipt of social welfare payments will be eligible for the forthcoming basic income guarantee pilot scheme for the arts and cultural sectors. [61463/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): As part of the *National Economic Recovery Plan*, I secured a commitment from Government to prioritise the development of a Basic Income Guarantee pilot scheme for the arts and cultural sector. Funding for the Basic Income Guarantee Pilot Scheme was a key priority of mine for Budget 2022 and I secured €25m to realise the pilot scheme next year.

As Minister with responsibility for Arts and Culture, I am conscious of the value that this sector brings to all Irish citizens. The importance of Irish culture, Irish art and Irish productions as a whole cannot be overstated - it contributes to individual and societal well-being, as well as contributing to Ireland's reputation as a country with a rich cultural history and output.

My Department is holding a stakeholder consultation forum on December 15th on the basic income guarantee pilot scheme, to provide stakeholders with the opportunity to engage with the policy development and share their views. Stakeholder engagement has been central to my Department's response to the pandemic and this forum will ensure that the arts sector, those working in it and the resource bodies and representative organisations are given the opportunity to feed into the policy development for the scheme. The selection process for recipients of the Basic Income Guarantee pilot scheme will be finalised following this forum, however, I can confirm the following:

- Participation in the scheme will not be based on a means test

- It will be a non-competitive process, therefore once a person satisfies the eligibility criteria they will be included in a randomised selection process

Proposals for the parameters of the scheme will be finalised in light of the stakeholder engagement.

In relation to the Deputy's specific concern, the receipt of social welfare payments will not be a disqualifying criteria.

I believe the Basic Income Guarantee pilot scheme will bring new life and support to the Arts and Cultural Sector and I hope it will provide an important legacy for our artists and creatives. In addition to this measure, I also secured continued investment of €130m for the Arts Council in 2022. Combined, these measures will significantly contribute to the development of the arts in Ireland.

Sports Funding

250. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when all applicants to the sports capital programme will be informed of the outcome of the assessment of their applications. [61563/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): The Sports Capital and Equipment Programme (SCEP) is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and physical recre-

ation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country. The 2020 round of the SCEP closed for applications on Monday 1st March 2021. By the closing date, over 3,100 applications were submitted seeking over €200m in funding. This is the highest number of applications ever received.

The scoring system and assessment procedures were published earlier this year and all applications are being assessed accordingly. Approximately one thousand of the submitted applications were for 'equipment-only' projects. These applications were assessed first and grants with a total value of €16.6m were announced on the 6th August. The associated letter of provisional allocation encouraged all grantees to draw down this funding before year-end if possible and accordingly my Department has been prioritising the payment of all existing grants. Ensuring that as many older grants as possible are paid before year-end will maximise the funding available to allocate to the 2020 capital SCEP applications.

In relation to the 2020 / 2021 capital SCEP applications, assessment work is continuing and every effort is being made to complete it as quickly as possible. Given the record number of applications received however, it is likely to take a further number of weeks to have these assessments fully complete with announcement of the final recommended allocations expected early in the New Year.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

251. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the supports Fáilte Ireland will have in place for coach operators for 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61959/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Fáilte Ireland recently announced indicative details of how the €50m funding provided in Budget 2022 for the Tourism Business Continuity Programme will be allocated to assist strategic tourism businesses, including coach tourism operators, to recover in 2022.

I have referred the Deputy's question to Fáilte Ireland for more details and direct reply on the supports they will have in place for coach operators in 2022. Please contact my private office if you have not received a reply within ten working days.

Departmental Schemes

252. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the total State expenditure on HAP in each of the years 2015 to 2020. [61858/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) is a flexible and immediate form of social housing support for people with a long-term housing need. Any household assessed by their local authority as eligible for social housing is immediately eligible for HAP. These households must find their own accommodation in the private rental sector.

The HAP scheme started in 2014 and at the end of Q3 2021, 97,600 HAP tenancies had been set-up since the scheme commenced, of which there were more than 62,300 households actively in receipt of HAP support and over 33,600 separate landlords and agents providing accommodation to households supported by the scheme.

The following table shows total expenditure by my Department for the HAP scheme for

each year 2015–2020:

Year	No. of local authorities operating HAP scheme	Outturn - €m
2015	18	15.6
2016	28	57.7
2017	31	152.7
2018	31	276.6
2019	31	382.4
2020	31	464.7

Waste Management

253. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the extent to which measures for the removal of plastic from the seas surrounding Ireland are in hand; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61952/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The two main measures for removal of plastic from the seas surrounding Ireland are the *Clean Coasts* programme, operated by the Environmental Education Unit of An Taisce, and the *Clean Oceans Initiative,* incorporating the international *Fishing for Litter* programme, which is managed by Bord Iascaigh Mhara.

Clean Coasts is funded and supported my Department and is incorporated into our national Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) Programme of Measures as an action to reduce marine litter. *Clean Coasts* continues to grow and, despite Covid, now has 1,860 active registered groups incorporating approximately 37,000 volunteers. An Taisce estimate that a minimum of 1,350 tonnes of litter was removed by groups in local coastal clean ups in 2021. In addition to the regular clean ups, 405 groups registered for the annual *Big Beach Clean* event in 2021 removing further estimated 42 tonnes of litter from beaches.

Since 2015 to Quarter 3 2021, the *Fishing for Litter* programme, part of Bord Iascaigh Mhara's *Clean Ocean Initiative,* has retrieved and disposed over 670 tonnes of marine litter through a national network of 12 ports with voluntary participation of 144 fishing vessels. In addition, since 2018 the aquaculture sector has retrieved over 165 tonnes of marine litter from commercial shore sites. Further information on the Clean Ocean Initiative is available from the Department of Agriculture food and the Marine.

As well as removing marine litter it is vital to reduce inputs of marine litter into the marine environment in the first place. Effective waste and litter management and control on land and at sea is key to achieving this. Accordingly a wide range of national and transboundary measures implemented across Government Departments and State Agencies are also incorporated into our national MSFD Programme of Measures as actions to reduce the impact of marine litter.

Electoral Process

254. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will provide an update on the work being done to date to implement a programme for Government commitment (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61132/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): As part of the work being done by my Department to implement the Programme for Government commitment in relation to considering the Institute of Public Administration (IPA) review of municipal districts, with a view to identifying local needs and the initiatives needed to strengthen and grow our communities, villages and towns in a sustainable manner, a local authority survey was carried out by my Department during the year to obtain the views from the local authority sector of their experience in the operation of Municipal Districts. The survey also focused on how the reform measures introduced in the Local Government Reform Act 2014 have taken effect across the local government sector.

The survey was directed to all Local Elected Representatives (949) and to the 31 Local Authority Executives separately. The survey was also divided up between local authorities that have a municipal district structure and those with area committees.

The findings of the survey will be circulated to the survey respondents in the coming days along with an invitation to attend a series of workshops to be held in the New Year. The outputs from the workshops, along with the survey results will form part of the Department's future proposals on strengthening Municipal Districts.

Fire Service

255. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of assaults that were recorded on firefighters from 2015 to date in 2021, by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61186/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The provision of a fire service in its functional area, including the establishment and maintenance of a fire brigade, the assessment of fire cover needs and the provision of fire station premises, is a statutory function of individual fire authorities under the Fire Services Act, 1981. My Department supports fire authorities through setting general policy, providing a central training programme, issuing guidance on operational and other related matters and providing capital funding support for equipment and priority infrastructural projects.

Attacks on emergency services personnel are completely unacceptable, and this is reflected in the specific legislation dealing with assaults on, or threats to, emergency workers in front line positions as contained in section 19 of the Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 1994 (as amended by section 185 of the Criminal Justice Act 2006). Section 19 provides that any person who assaults a person providing medical services at or in a hospital, or a peace officer acting in the execution of their duty, is guilty of an offence and is liable on summary conviction to a fine or a term of imprisonment not exceeding 12 months or both or, on conviction on indictment, to a fine or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 7 years, or to both. A peace officer refers to a member of An Garda Síochána, a prison officer, a member of the fire brigade, ambulance personnel or a member of the defence forces. The offences in section 19 were extended to hospital, ambulance and fire brigade personnel by means of section 185 of the Criminal Justice Act 2006 in order to address the problem of assaults and obstruction of personnel engaged in providing emergency services.

In addition to the special offences under section 19 of the 1994 Act, the general criminal law applies. For example, in the case of an assault causing serious harm to an emergency worker, the offender may be prosecuted under the Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person Act 1997.

With regard to the Fire Service, the provision of a fire service in its functional area is a

statutory function of individual fire authorities under the Fire Services Act, 1981 and 2003. Any queries relating to assaults perpetrated against members of the fire service staff, or successful prosecutions taken against those who committed such assaults, should be referred to individual fire authorities. As Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, I have no function in the matter and the information sought is not available in my Department.

Individual fire authorities have engaged with communities in areas where incidents occur with a view to reducing the number of these types of violent attacks. Nonetheless, decisions taken to proceed in specific situations, to avoid incidents, and how to proceed with prosecutions are appropriately made by the relevant authorities, in consultation with An Garda Síochána.

Hare Coursing

256. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the reason a local community park (details supplied) is shut to the public during Covid-19 to allow a barbaric and cruel activity such as hare coursing. [61190/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I issue licences to the Irish Coursing Club to facilitate the capture (under Section 34) and tagging of hares (under Section 32) for closed park meetings under the Wildlife Acts. I have no function in relation to the location of these meetings.

Housing Schemes

257. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if local authority tenants living in Part 5 housing can avail of the proposed new tenant purchase scheme; when the new tenant purchase scheme will be introduced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61193/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Tenant (Incremental) Purchase Scheme came into operation on 1 January 2016. The scheme is open to eligible tenants, including joint tenants, of local authority houses that are available for sale under the Scheme. Eligible tenants are those with a minimum reckonable income of €15,000 per annum and who have been in receipt of social housing support for at least one year.

The scheme is governed by the Housing (Sale of Local Authority Houses) Regulations 2015. The regulations provide for specified classes of houses to be excluded from sale, including those provided to local authorities under Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000.

The Part V provisions seek to promote social integration and secure mixed tenure, sustainable communities. Accordingly, Part V homes are excluded from the scheme to ensure the original policy goals of the legislation are not eroded over time and that they remain available for people most in need of social housing support.

Housing for All, A New Housing Plan for Ireland, commits to maintaining the right of social housing tenants to purchase their own home with some changes to eligibility. This commitment is being advanced as part of the broader social housing reform agenda. I expect to finalise changes to the scheme before the end of the year.

Planning Issues

258. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the temporary provision regarding exempted development in SI No. 30 of 2018, which is due to expire at the end of 2021 will be extended; his plans in relation to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61221/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): The Planning and Development (Amendment) (No.2) Regulations 2018 - S.I. No. 30 of 2018 - which came into operation on 8 February 2018, provide for an exemption from the requirement to obtain planning permission in respect of the change of use of certain vacant commercial premises, including vacant areas above ground floor premises, to residential use. This measure was aimed at facilitating the productive re-use of qualifying vacant commercial buildings as homes, while also facilitating urban renewal and the bringing on stream of increased housing supply. The original expiry date of the Regulations was 31 December 2021 which was subsequently extended to 25 February 2022 arising from the Covid-related extension of statutory deadlines within the planning system in respect of the period March to May 2020.

The Government's recently published *New Housing Plan for Ireland - Housing for All* commits to reviewing and extending the 2018 regulations that exempt certain vacant commercial premises from the requirement to obtain planning permission for change of use to residential purposes to the end of 2025. My Department is presently examining potential areas where the scope of the existing exempted development regulations, introduced by S.I. No. 30 of 2018, might possibly be extended to include other forms of vacant commercial premises.

Under section 262(4) of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, legislative proposals in relation to exempted development require the approval of both Houses of the Oireachtas before they can be signed into law. It is intended to submit the final draft regulations in this regard to the Oireachtas for approval shortly.

Housing Provision

259. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the development of the site of St. Kevin's Hospital, Cork; the number of units of housing that will be delivered on the site; the number of these that will be social; the number that will be cost rental; the number that will be affordable purchase; if the average purchase cost and rental price for the affordable rental and affordable purchase can also be outlined; and the timeline for delivery. [61224/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Land Development Agency (LDA) was established on an interim basis in September 2018, by way of an Establishment Order made under the Local Government Services (Corporate Bodies) Act 1971. The Land Development Agency Act was recently signed in law and, on commencement, the LDA will be established as a commercial State agency.

The LDA are currently progressing the development of a HSE site at St Kevin's Hospital in Cork. The site is 14.5 acres and is expected to deliver 265 homes, of which there will be 100 houses or duplexes and 165 apartments. In April this year the LDA was granted planning permission for this site and the LDA have advised my Department that a tender for enabling works was recently issued. These enabling works are expected to commence in Q1/Q2 2022, with the first homes delivered in 2023. This is predicated on successful procurement of building contractors through an open tender process.

In line with Part V of the Local Government Act 2000, as amended by Part 6 of the Affordable Housing Act 2021, a minimum of 20% of this site will be developed for local authority social and affordable housing. Furthermore, under the LDA Act, there is a minimum 50% affordable housing delivery requirement for those relevant public lands which are subject to Part 9 of the Act, with a minimum of 80% affordable housing on relevant public lands in urban areas with a population greater than 150,000, that is Dublin and Cork cities. This will be in addition to the increased 20% Part V social and affordable housing obligation introduced under the Affordable Housing Act which will ensure that there will be 100% affordable and social housing on such lands in our largest cities. At this stage, the exact mix of cost rental and affordable purchase on St. Kevin's Hospital is yet to be finalised, however the LDA anticipate that both forms of affordable housing will be delivered on the site

The LDA have advised that the affordable purchase homes will be made available at up to the maximum reduction to market value in line with the Affordable Housing Act 2021, and any subsequent regulations. They have also advised that it is not possible, at this point in time, to state what the price for cost rental homes will be as it will depend on a number of factors such as construction costs.

Traveller Accommodation

260. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the extent to which his Department has realised the 18 of the 32 recommendations contained in the Traveller accommodation expert review report and set out as a work plan by the Programme Board for 2021; his plans in 2022 to realise the outstanding recommendations in particular the replacement of local Traveller accommodation consultative committees by Traveller accommodation strategic policy committees; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61249/21]

305. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if research has been done into the move away from Traveller specific accommodation as a first-choice preference for young Travellers; his views on whether this is owing to the fact that Traveller specific accommodation is harder to secure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61622/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): I propose to take Questions Nos. 260 and 305 together.

The Traveller Accommodation Expert Review report, published in July 2019, reviewed the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998 and other legislation that impacts on the provision and delivery of accommodation for Travellers. The Research Report 'Experiences of Travellers in the Private Rented Sector' is listed in the Expert Review report among the key reports reviewed. The Expert Review report, which is intended to improve the effectiveness of the arrangements for providing accommodation for members of the Traveller community, has 32 recommendations across 4 categories which are aimed at:

Delivery and implementation of the recommendations will involve several areas within my Department as well as input from other Departments, local authorities and other external stakeholders.

A Programme Board established to drive implementation of the recommendations from the Expert Group report has agreed a work programme for 2021 focused on national issues and the local level strategic policy committees will be considered in due course. The Programme Board

recently agreed to report progress on implementation of the recommendations on my Department's website. It is expected that this information will be available shortly.

Housing Policy

261. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his attention has been drawn to a campaign by several disability organisations (details supplied) in relation to Part M (Access and Use) of the 2010 building regulations; if he will have a time-limited review of Part M of the regulations with a view to changing the regulations in order that they support the construction of new homes that are wheelchair liveable rather than merely wheelchair visitable; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61298/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): The Building Regulations apply to the design and construction of all new buildings (including dwellings) and to certain works to existing buildings. They are subject to ongoing review in the interests of safety and the well-being of persons in the built environment and to ensure that due regard is taken of changes in construction techniques, technological progress and innovation.

The Building Regulations (Part M Amendment) Regulations 2010, and the accompanying Technical Guidance Document M – Access and Use (2010), which came into effect on 1 January 2012, set out the minimum statutory requirements that a building must achieve in respect of access. Part M aims to foster an inclusive approach to the design and construction of the built environment. While the Part M requirements may be regarded as a statutory minimum level of provision, the accompanying technical guidance encourages building owners and designers to have regard to the design philosophy of universal design and to consider making additional provisions where practicable and appropriate.

Housing needs of people with disabilities are addressed in the National Housing Strategy for People with a Disability (NHSPWD) 2016-2021. A new NHSPWD, is currently being developed by my Department and the Department of Health, with a view to publishing by the end of 2021. The strategy is about facilitating the provision of housing options and related services to disabled people to allow individual choice and support independent living.

In accordance with the vision and strategic aims of the current NHSPWD to achieve a co-ordinated and integrated approach to meeting the housing needs of people with a disability at local level, Housing and Disability Steering Groups (HDSGs) have been established in all local authority areas. These are chaired by the Directors of Housing with membership including the Health Service Executive (HSE) and disability representatives.

Each HDSG has prepared a local Strategic Plan for its own City/County area, to develop specific local strategies to meet the identified and emerging housing needs of people with disabilities in their areas with a view to developing annual targets for the delivery of housing to people with a disability on their housing waiting lists.

Separately, Action 97 of the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 states – "*We will prepare policy advice on ways of achieving universal design solutions for new housing so that new homes can be accessed and used by all persons, irrespective of size, age, ability or disability. We will advise on any implications of same for stakeholders including designers, builders, homeowners and tenants."* I understand that the National Disability Authority (NDA), which falls under the remit of my colleague, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth, is working on this policy advice. The NDA are an independent statutory

body that provides information and advice to the Government on policy and practice relevant to the lives of persons with disabilities.

The NDA also provides comprehensive guidance on how to design, build and manage buildings and spaces so that they can be readily accessed and used by everyone, regardless of age, size, ability or disability. 'Building for Everyone, A Universal Design Approach', a NDA publication, may be accessed at www.nda.ie.

The *'Programme for Government Our Shared Future'* commits to ensuring that there is an appropriate mix of housing design types provided, including universally designed units, and accommodation for older people and people with disabilities.

The joint policy statement *Housing Options for Our Ageing Population*, launched by my Department and the Department of Health in 2019, includes an Action on universal design to *"In partnership with industry, introduce measures to ensure that over a five year period delivery is increased to ensure that 30% of all new dwellings are built to incorporate universal design principles to accommodate our ageing population."*

Appropriate analysis to identify delivery approaches to address this commitment is currently being undertaken by the NDA.

Planning Issues

262. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if a county council must erect site notices, display pending documents and applications on their websites for section 254 licences and allow observations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61313/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): Under Section 254(7) of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended (the Act), development carried out on public roads in accordance with a licence under section 254 shall be exempted development for the purposes of this Act. Therefore, the normal procedures regarding planning permission do not apply.

It should be noted that this exemption from planning is removed under Section 4(4) of the Act for cases where the proposed development requires Environmental Impact Assessment or Appropriate Assessment. In addition, the exemption is also removed under Section 57 of the Act for cases where development would materially affect the character of a protected structure, or any element of the protected structure which contributes to its special architectural, historical, archaeological, artistic, cultural, scientific, social or technical interest.

In such cases where full planning permission is required, this process would include the erection of site notices, the placing of newspaper advertisements, making planning application documentation available for inspection in planning offices and online, and for the making of submissions by the public.

Defective Building Materials

263. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans under the mica redress scheme for houses that are classed as holiday homes but are a semi-detached to a house that is a family home and a principal residence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61354/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Government agreed an enhanced €2.2bn Defective Concrete Block scheme on 30 November 2021. The comprehensive changes include:

- The current 90% maximum grant will be increased to a 100% grant for all remediation options 1-5

- The maximum grant cap for option 1 (demolition and rebuild) will be increased to €420,000 from €247,500

- The grant calculation methodology will be based on the cost per square foot (psf) of rebuilding the existing home, with costings to be set by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in consultation with the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland (SCSI). An indicative rate of €145 per square foot is set for the first 1,000 sq foot based on SCSI methodology with a sliding scale thereafter.

- A revised application process will be introduced which will only require the homeowner to submit an initial 'Building Condition Assessment' at minimal cost recoupable on entry to the Scheme. The Housing Agency will take over testing, sampling and categorisation of remedial works.

- Alternative accommodation and storage costs are to be included, subject to a maximum of €20,000

- In relation to works carried out under remediation options 2-5, a second grant option, will be available for such a home in the future if blockwork which was not removed as part of the initial remediation work subsequently proves defective in accordance with the IS:465 standard

- A new independent appeals process will be introduced

- The Scheme will be extended beyond the current scope of Principal Private Residences only, to also cover Residential Tenancies Board registered rental properties, subject to the introduction of a clawback mechanism upon re-sale within a set time period depending on the remediation option used. Opportunities for the State to acquire such rental properties for social housing purposes will also be examined.

The priority must be to ensure that homes being occupied as principal private residences are remediated and Government has therefore prioritised owner occupied principal private residences and tenanted rental properties which were RTB registered as at 1 November 2021.

There are no plans to extend eligibility for this scheme beyond those homes identified in the Government decision of 30 November, 2021.

Rental Sector

264. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Housing; Local Government and Heritage if he will extend the rent pressure zones to include electoral areas in County Donegal to reflect the recent sharp increases in rent in some areas of the county and the knock-on impact of the mica defective concrete block crisis. [61373/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Section 24A of the Residential Tenancies Acts 2004, as amended, provides that the Housing Agency, in consultation with housing authorities, may make a proposal to the Minister that an area should be considered as a Rent Pressure Zone. Following receipt of such a proposal, the

Minister requests the Director of the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) to conduct an assessment of the area to establish whether or not it meets the criteria for designation and to report to the Minister on whether the area should be designated as a Rent Pressure Zone (RPZ). For the purpose of the Act, 'area' is defined as either the administrative area of a housing authority or a Local Electoral Area (LEA) within the meaning of section 2 of the Local Government Act 2001. There is no provision for any other type of area to be designated as a Rent Pressure Zone.

The criteria to be satisfied by an area under section 24A(4) of the Residential Tenancies Act for designation as an RPZ are as follows:

the information relating to the area, as determined by reference to the information used to compile each RTB Rent Index quarterly report, shows that the annual rate of increase in the average amount of rent for that area is more than 7% in each of at least 4 of the 6 quarters preceding the period immediately prior to the date of the Housing Agency's proposal, and

the average rent for the area in the last quarter, as determined by reference to the information used to compile each RTB Rent Index quarterly report, is –

in the case of counties Kildare, Meath and Wicklow or an LEA in any one of those counties, above the average rent in the State, excluding rents in the 4 Dublin Local Authority areas, or

in the case of any LEA outside of the Greater Dublin Area (i.e. Dublin, Kildare, Meath and Wicklow), above the average rent in the State, excluding rents in the Greater Dublin Area.

Each RTB quarterly Rent Index Report includes a summary table of the data used to establish whether each Local Electoral Area fulfils the criteria for designation as a Rent Pressure Zone. This ensures transparency in relation to the position of individual areas in terms of average rent levels and increases.

The RTB Rent Index measures rent increases in LEAs using the 2019 boundaries for these LEAs and there is no specific measure to calculate rental increases broken down to any lower level (i.e. part of an LEA).

The Housing Agency and the RTB will continue to monitor national rents and if any LEA in Donegal meets the designation criteria it will be designated as a RPZ.

Defective Building Materials

265. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the reason the Housing Agency is not being given responsibility for the delivery of the mica and pyrite defective block redress scheme in the west of Ireland from start to finish as it has been with the pyrite remediation scheme. [61374/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): In response to concerns raised by homeowners in Donegal and Mayo regarding the terms of the existing Defective Concrete Blocks Grant Scheme, I established a timebound and representative Working Group to consider and report on the issues. I have acknowledged that the current scheme was challenging for all stakeholders and did not operate as intended for homeowners. I have listened to homeowners and the core issues identified in the report of the Working Group will be addressed through a combination of immediate actions, medium term legislative changes and important research and reviews to encompass ongoing critical research and new learnings.

The Government agreed an enhanced €2.2bn Defective Concrete Block scheme on 30 November 2021. The comprehensive changes which target the core issues include:-

- A revised application process will be introduced which will only require the homeowner to submit an initial 'Building Condition Assessment' at minimal cost recoupable on entry to the Scheme. The Housing Agency will take over testing, sampling and categorisation of remedial works.

- The current 90% maximum grant payable will be increased to a 100% grant for all remediation options 1-5

- The maximum grant cap for option 1 (demolition and rebuild) will be increased to €420,000 from €247,500

- The grant calculation methodology will be based on the cost per square foot (psf) of rebuilding the existing home, with costings to be set by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in consultation with the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland (SCSI). An indicative rate of €145 per square foot is set for the first 1,000 sq foot based on SCSI methodology with a sliding scale thereafter.

- Alternative accommodation and storage costs are to be included, subject to a maximum of €20,000

- In relation to works carried out under remediation options 2-5, a second grant option will be available for such a home in the future if blockwork which was not removed as part of the initial remediation work subsequently proves defective in accordance with the IS:465 standard

- A new independent appeals process will be introduced

- The Scheme will be extended beyond the current scope of Principal Private Residences only, to also cover Residential Tenancies Board registered rental properties, subject to the introduction of a clawback mechanism upon re-sale within a set time period depending on the remediation option used. Opportunities for the State to acquire such rental properties for social housing purposes will also be examined.

The Housing Agency's role in the enhanced scheme will be significant. They will act as agents on behalf of the local authorities. Applications received by a local authority will be referred to the Housing Agency to review the 'Building Condition Assessment Report'. Once the criteria has been met for entry to the scheme, the Housing Agency will arrange the assessment, testing and categorisation process as required and recommend the appropriate remediation option and grant amount. This approach removes the financial barrier faced by some homeowners and was one of the key issues discussed at the Working Group meetings. It will also give homeowners the flexibility to manage their own projects and allow them to deal directly with their chosen supervising engineer and building contractor.

Wildlife Conservation

266. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address a matter (details supplied) with reference to European Court of Justice case C-247/85, Commission v. Belgium, 1985. [61376/21]

267. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address a series of matters (details supplied) with reference to European Court of

Justice case C-247/85, Commission v. Belgium, 1985. [61377/21]

268. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his Department and the National Parks and Wildlife Service are primarily responsible for ensuring that the State is compliant with the EU Habitats Directive and the EU Birds Directive in particular the Habitats Directive Articles 2 and 16.1.a, .b and .c and the Birds Directive Articles 2 and 9.1.a. [61378/21]

269. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address a series of matters (details supplied) in relation to annual wild birds' derogation declarations. [61379/21]

270. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his views on whether high density European herring gull colonies have been enabled to proliferate exponentially in urban areas as policy under legal protection administered by his Department and without being subject to management and control in view of the results of the National Survey of Urban Gulls commissioned in May to July 2021 by his Department and the National Parks and Wildlife Service. [61380/21]

271. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his views on whether freely proliferating high density European herring gull colonies are impacting negatively and seriously on communities in ways that are egregiously antisocial (details supplied); his views on the supporting evidence held by his Department and the National Parks and Wildlife Service on each of these serious concerns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61381/21]

272. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address a series of matters in relation to the birds directive (details supplied). [61382/21]

273. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the meaning of adapt the population in Article 1 of the birds directive in the contexts set out in Article 16.1.c of the habitats directive and Article 2 of the birds directive; and if this legal responsibility placed on member states by the European Commission in the directives includes upwards and downwards adaptation of population numbers as appropriate within the law and prevailing circumstances. [61383/21]

274. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the meaning of, in the interests of public health and public safety, or for other imperative reasons of overriding public interest, including those of a social or economic nature, in Article 16.1.c of the habitats directive; and if he is satisfied that his Department is properly meeting its responsibilities in each of these regards in relation to high density urban seagull colonies. [61384/21]

278. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address a series of matters (details supplied) in relation to the results of the National Survey of Urban Gulls commissioned in the period May to June 2021. [61388/21]

279. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address a series of matters (details supplied) in relation to the results of the National Survey of Urban Gulls commissioned in the period May to June 2021. [61389/21]

283. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address a series of matters (details supplied) with reference to the 2021 National Survey of Urban Seagulls commissioned by his Department and the National Parks and Wild-

life Service and the Seabird 2000 Census Report 2002. [61393/21]

285. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his views on whether it is now essential to urgently implement recommendation 8 of the report of his predecessor's consultative committee on urban seagulls of 17 April 2020 in the interests of public health and safety in line with emphatic legal advices provided to him via the committee in August 2020 and February 2021 and thereby to modify and extend the now five-year-old pilot Balbriggan derogation declaration to other impacted towns and communities in order to legally and properly protect the interests of public health and safety as catered for under Article 9.1.a of the 1979 birds directive and Article 16.1.c of the habitats directive; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61395/21]

290. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address a series on matters in relation to the urban gull population (details supplied). [61400/21]

291. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the actions he plans to take to protect schools, school children, school staff and school property in the areas in which high density colonies are freely proliferating, for example, Balbriggan, Skerries, Howth and Drogheda as shown in the National Survey of Urban Gulls commissioned by his Department and the National Parks and Wildlife Service in May to June 2021 (details supplied). [61401/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 266 to 274, inclusive, 278, 279, 283, 285, 290 and 291 together.

As answered in previous Questions on this issue, my officials are continuing to work on assessing the recommendations of the first interim report of the Consultative Committee on urban gulls, which undertook a review of the issues relating to the impact of gulls in urban areas. My officials have begun the process of engaging with a number of bodies in order to move the recommendations forward.

Further to this, my Department undertook a National Gull Survey in 2021, the results of which will also inform ongoing work with stakeholders and communities to address concerns or conflict issues.

In terms of schools, Section 42 of the Wildlife Acts allows applications to be made to apply for a licence to remove nests and eggs from buildings, on a case by case basis, where serious damage has occurred. A licence may also be applied for under Section 22(9)(d) to take the nests or eggs of protected wild birds for other purposes. Applications are investigated by local staff and recommendations made on the most practical method of stopping or controlling the problem. As the Deputy will also be aware, a pilot derogation declaration is in place for a specified area in relation to the taking of nests and eggs, and my Department is considering the implications of extending same.

My Department is reviewing the Wild Birds Declaration wording in particular around the legal aspects of its implementation.

Question No. 267 answered with Question No. 266.

Question No. 268 answered with Question No. 266.

Question No. 269 answered with Question No. 266.

Question No. 270 answered with Question No. 266.

Question No. 271 answered with Question No. 266.

Question No. 272 answered with Question No. 266.

Question No. 273 answered with Question No. 266.

Question No. 274 answered with Question No. 266.

Wildlife Conservation

275. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when his Department or the National Parks and Wildlife Service will publish the report of the 2021 National Survey of Urban Gulls commissioned in the period May to June 2021. [61385/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): The report was published by my Department last week and is available on the website of the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

[2021 Report]

Wildlife Conservation

276. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his Department or the National Parks and Wildlife Service will publish the analysis of the results of the 2021 National Survey of Urban Gulls that it commissioned in the period May to June 2021 in time for its customary annual public consultation on derogation declarations for the 2021-2022 declarations in order that contributors to the public consultation who live in areas impacted by high density urban seagull colonies may be fully informed of the survey results and of derogation options; and if his Department or the National Parks and Wildlife Service will ensure that its analysis of the survey results includes substantive correlation to the first interim and minority reports submitted in April 2020 and the recommendations of the consultative committee on urban seagulls in particular but not exclusively the reports' recommendations regarding the interests of public health and safety. [61386/21]

277. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his Department and the National Parks and Wildlife Service will ensure when publishing its analysis of the National Survey of Urban Gulls that it commissioned in the period May to June 2021 that it includes in its analysis particular reference to the evidence it holds on the negative impacts on communities from proliferating high density seagull colonies, the expert advices that it has received via the consultative committee on urban seagulls since 2019, including legal advices and the legitimate interests of public health and safety which can be addressed in derogation declarations. [61387/21]

280. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address a series of matters (details supplied) with reference to the 2021 National Survey of Urban Seagulls commissioned by his Department and the National Parks and Wildlife Service. [61390/21]

281. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address a series of matters (details supplied) with reference to the 2021 National Survey of Urban Seagulls commissioned by his Department and the National Parks and Wildlife Service. [61391/21]

282. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address a series of matters (details supplied) with reference to the 2021 National Survey of Urban Seagulls commissioned by his Department and the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Seabird 2000 Census Report 2002. [61392/21]

284. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address a series of matters (details supplied) with reference to the 2021 National Survey of Urban Seagulls commissioned by his Department and the National Parks and Wildlife Service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61394/21]

286. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the Dublin survey only covered a limited number of areas with reference to the National Survey of Urban Gulls commissioned by his Department and the National Parks and Wildlife Service; and the names of Dublin city districts and suburbs that were actually included in the national survey and the apparently occupied nest totals for each surveyed location. [61396/21]

287. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the locations and suburbs in Dublin that yielded the total of 770 apparently occupied nests with reference to the National Survey of Urban Gulls commissioned by his Department and the National Parks and Wildlife Service and with particular reference to the survey results for Dublin; and if these were actual nest sightings. [61397/21]

288. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address a series of matters (details supplied) with reference to the 2021 National Survey of Urban Seagulls commissioned by his Department and the National Parks and Wildlife Service. [61398/21]

289. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address a series on matters in relation to the urban gull population (details supplied). [61399/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 276, 277, 280 to 282, inclusive, 284 and 286 to 289, inclusive, together.

My Department undertook the National Urban Gull Survey in 2021 as part of a wider seabird surveying collaboration with the UK known as *Seabirds Count*. The published report, enclosed for convenience, sets out the spatial focus of the surveys (Figures 2 and 4), including for a number of specific towns. In addition, Dublin City Centre and adjacent coastal suburbs also received additional survey effort.

This has allowed modelling work to be undertaken to derive preliminary estimates of the gull populations in the seven focal towns. This preliminary analysis focused on estimating the size of the breeding gull population, i.e. Apparently Occupied Nests (AON) and enables the quantification of gulls nesting in these towns. This will allow my Department to continue to work with stakeholders and communities with a view to reducing any conflict issues.

The analysis of the Irish and UK data is ongoing for the relevant gull species, as well as for other breeding seabird species; it is intended to derive population estimates at the country scale, for the Seabirds Count publication due in 2023. Comparisons of historical data of Herring Gull

populations will be part of the overall analysis and reporting under the Seabirds Count initiative.

The recent European Red List of Birds uses the IUCN Red List Categories and Criteria and has classified the extinction risk of Herring Gull at the European level as 'Least Concern', an improvement from the previous assessment of 'Near Threatened'.

[2021 National Survey of Urban Gulls]

Question No. 277 answered with Question No. 276.

Question No. 278 answered with Question No. 266.

Question No. 279 answered with Question No. 266.

Question No. 280 answered with Question No. 276.

Question No. 281 answered with Question No. 276.

Question No. 282 answered with Question No. 276.

Question No. 283 answered with Question No. 266.

Question No. 284 answered with Question No. 276.

Question No. 285 answered with Question No. 266.

Question No. 286 answered with Question No. 276.

Question No. 287 answered with Question No. 276.

Question No. 288 answered with Question No. 276.

Question No. 289 answered with Question No. 276.

Question No. 290 answered with Question No. 266.

Question No. 291 answered with Question No. 266.

Housing Schemes

292. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if applicants to the Rebuilding Ireland home loan are required to wait until three months after their last employment wage subsidy scheme payment until they can be approved for a mortgage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61455/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Local authorities when processing Rebuilding Ireland Home Loans (RIHL) must lend mortgages on a prudent basis, taking into account the most recent income and employment data available. It would not be appropriate to lend when there is an identifiable risk that the person's income and ability to pay might not return to the level required to support the borrowing requested. This is both for the protection of the lender and the borrower, in particular to seek to ensure that borrowers are not left with unsustainable debt burdens, given that a mortgage is a long-term commitment.

Under the RIHL Scheme, where an applicant's employer is availing of EWSS and an applicant is approved for an RIHL, drawdown would not usually commence until their unsupported income post EWSS has returned to the level specified in the original application for a period, usually up to three months.

However, given the ongoing COVID-19 situation, I issued a further direction to Local Authorities on 1 December 2021 in Circular 41/2021 for applicant(s) who have an approval in principle and wish to draw down their mortgage. Local Authorities now have discretion, on a case-by-case basis, to allow drawdown for applicant(s) whose employer is availing of EWSS, if repayment capacity can be assured based on the applicant(s)' income and if a letter of assurance from the employer availing of EWSS confirming the sustainability of the applicant(s) employment is submitted

The final decision on Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan applications is a matter for the relevant local authority.

Housing Provision

293. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when the annual statutory summary of social housing assessments will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61462/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The 2021 Summary of Social Housing Assessments (SSHA) process is currently underway and the results will be published towards the end of Quarter 1, 2022.

The SSHA is a point in time snapshot of demand for social housing support in local authority areas and does not necessarily reflect continuous entry to and exit from the housing waiting lists. The most recently published summary, conducted in November 2020, shows 61,880 households assessed as qualified for and needing social housing support. This is a decrease of 6,813 households, or 9.9%, on the last assessment in June 2019. Since 2016, the numbers have decreased from 91,600 to 61,880, a decrease of 32.4%.

The summary report for 2020, which includes breakdowns by each local authority across a range of categories, is available at the link below.

SSHA 2020 Report www.gov.ie/en/publication/970ea-summary-of-social-housing-assessments-2020-key-findings/#:~:text=The%20Summary%20of%20Social%20Housing,is%20not%20currently%20being%20met.

Housing Policy

294. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will update housing circular 41 of 2012 to reflect the relevant changes in Irish immigration law such as SI No. 548/2015 - European Communities (Free Movement of Persons) Regulations 2015. and relevant case law; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61562/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Applications for social housing support are assessed by local authorities in accordance with the eligibility and need criteria set down in section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the associated Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011 (as amended).

As social housing support is intended to address a household's long-term housing need it is expected that households applying for such support have a long-term right to reside in the State. My Department is currently reviewing the approach in this area and will finalise proposals in the new year.

Electoral Process

295. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the Electoral Reform Bill 2020 will be enacted in time to carry out the functions currently assigned to a constituency commission under the Electoral Act 1997 following the completion of the Census in 2022. [61566/21]

296. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the Electoral Reform Bill 2020 will be enacted in time to carry out the functions currently assigned to local electoral boundary committees under the Local Government Act 1991 following the completion of the Census in 2022. [61567/21]

297. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he plans to conduct a review of local electoral areas in advance of the next local government elections expected in 2024. [61568/21]

298. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the new electoral Commission will have the remit to carry out reviews of Dáil Éireann and European Parliament boundaries in addition to local electoral boundaries alongside each other following the conclusion of the 2022 census; and if not, if the processes that would be conducted separately. [61569/21]

299. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if there have been discussions in relation to or the likely terms of reference for a local government boundary review to be conducted prior to the expected local elections in 2024. [61570/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 295 to 299, inclusive, together.

Article 16 of the Constitution sets out clearly and distinctly the overarching requirements that apply to the membership of Dáil Éireann. In addition, and complementary to the constitutional provisions of Article 16.2 in particular, Part II of the Electoral Act 1997 (as amended) provides for a constituency review following each Census of Population and establishes, among other things, the terms of reference of a Constituency Commission.

In very broad terms, the publication of preliminary census results triggers the establishment of a Constituency Commission under section 5(1) of the Electoral Act 1997 with the Commission required, under section 9(1) of that Act, to present its report on Dáil and European Parliament constituencies to the chairman of the Dáil within three months of publication of final census results. The timing for the publication of both preliminary census results and final census results are matters for the Central Statistics Office but typically have taken place within approximately 3 months and 12 months respectively of the holding of the census.

Notwithstanding the above, in January of this year, Minister O'Brien and I published the General Scheme of the Electoral Reform Bill. The general scheme addresses a number of commitments in the Programme for Government - Our Shared Future including the commitment to establish a statutory Electoral Commission. The general scheme has been published on my

Department's website at www.gov.ie/en/publication/34cf6-general-scheme-of-the-electoral-reform-bill-2020/. The Bill is included on the list of priority legislation in the Government's current legislation programme and I expect that it will be published and will commence its progress through the Oireachtas in the new year.

The Electoral Commission will be independent of Government and will report directly to the Oireachtas. Following its establishment, it will, among other matters, take on several existing statutory electoral functions from the outset, including the work currently undertaken by Constituency Commissions.

In September 2020, the Government, on the advice of the Central Statistics Office, decided to postpone the 2021 Census due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The next census is now due to take place on 3 April 2022. The next review of Dáil and European Parliament constituencies will commence following the publication of preliminary census results, will be undertaken in compliance with our constitutional requirements and will be completed in accordance with the statutory timeframe.

Unlike the position for Dáil and European Parliament constituencies, there is no constitutional or legislative requirement for the revision of local electoral areas.

Section 23 of the Local Government Act 2001 empowers the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to divide a local authority area into local electoral areas and to amend those areas. However, in advance of deciding to make an order under section 23 of the Act, the Minister must, in accordance with section 32(2) of the Local Government Act 1991, request a boundary committee to make a report having regard to such matters as may be specified by the Minister. The publication of Census of Population data is one of a number of factors that informs the preparation of terms of reference for any review of local electoral areas to be undertaken and provides a basis for the work of any Local Electoral Area Boundary Committee(s) which may be established by the Minister from time to time. The Minister must publish the report of the boundary committee and must have regard to the report of that committee when deciding to make an order in relation to the revision of local electoral area boundaries.

Similar to the approach outlined above for the review of Dáil and European Parliament constituencies the General Scheme of the Electoral Reform Bill provides that, following its establishment, the Electoral Commission will take on the work currently undertaken by Local Electoral Area Boundary Committees. No decision has been taken at this point in time in relation to a review of local electoral area boundaries in advance of the next local elections in 2024.

Question No. 296 answered with Question No. 295.

Question No. 297 answered with Question No. 295.

Question No. 298 answered with Question No. 295.

Question No. 299 answered with Question No. 295.

Wind Energy Guidelines

300. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the timeline for the publication of the revised wind energy development guidelines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61571/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

(Deputy Peter Burke): My Department is currently undertaking a focused review of the 2006 Wind Energy Development Guidelines. The review is addressing a number of key aspects including noise, setback, shadow flicker, community obligation, community dividend and grid connections.

Guidance on the noise aspect is currently being finalised by my Department in conjunction with the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC), which has primary responsibility for environmental noise matters. Significant work has been undertaken on the noise elements and the two Departments recently met to discuss new developments in this regard including consideration of the impact of the revised 2030 target to generate up to 80% of our electricity from renewable sources and the need to ensure that proposals regarding the measurement and assessment of noise from wind turbines are fit for purpose. These aspects are currently being considered and further engagement between the Departments is expected imminently. Following this inter-departmental engagement, I will be in a better position to provide an update on the expected publication date of the revised Guidelines, the finalisation of which remains a priority.

It should also be noted that the review and finalisation of the Guidelines has been included as a specific action in the recently published Climate Action Plan.

When finalised, the revised Guidelines will be issued under section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended. Planning authorities and, where applicable, An Bord Pleanála, must have regard to guidelines issued under section 28 in the performance of their functions generally under the Planning Acts. In the meantime, the current 2006 Wind Energy Development Guidelines remain in force.

Departmental Strategies

301. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the timeline for the publication of the national coastal change management strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61572/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): The National Coastal Change Management Strategy Steering Group is jointly chaired by my Department and the Office of Public Works (OPW). The Group is comprised of senior officials from the Department of Communications, Climate Action and the Environment, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Met Éireann, and the County and City Management Association. The Group met for the first time on 3 September 2020.

Further to the initial meeting of the Steering Group in September 2020, a technical working group was also established under the stewardship of the OPW. The work of this group has focused on the identification and initial analysis of data sources, to underpin the work of the Steering Group.

Since the initial meeting in September, the work of the Steering Group was progressed through a series of bilateral meetings to scope out the extent of the issues, including, inter alia, the threats and effects of coastal change as they relate to the remit of the individual Steering Group members and the wider stakeholders.

The intention of these bilateral meetings has been to give an opportunity to discuss the emerging work of the Group and to stimulate the most effective engagement of these key stake-

holders. The meetings to date have been very useful in allowing for issues relating to coastal change management to be reflected upon and explored in the context of the particular operations of the participating organisations.

The findings of the Steering Group are currently being finalised and a scoping report will be presented to Government for consideration early in 2022. The scoping report on a National Coastal Change Management Strategy is intended to provide a framework for key decisions to be taken on how Ireland could best manage its coastline in light of the future risks.

Planning Issues

302. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of build-to-rent planning permissions approved in County Cork in 2021; and the number of units this equates to. [61582/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): Planning statistics are compiled by each planning authority on an annual basis for collation and publication on my Department's website, at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/service/9e4ee-get-planning-statistics/.

However, the data collected relates to the total number of applications and decisions for all developments that require planning permission, broken down by year and planning authority, but does not give detail on build-to-rent planning permissions approved. Such information may be sought directly from the relevant planning authority.

In addition, the Central Statistics Office (CSO), as the national statistical office, compiles and makes available detailed data on a number of planning related issues including permissions granted and completions by development type and county. Data is available at the following link on the CSO website: www.cso.ie/en/statistics/construction/planningpermissions/.

Homeless Accommodation

303. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage further to Parliamentary Question No. 16 of 11 November 2021, the payments that were made by county in 2021 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61619/21]

312. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the breakdown of the payments drawn down by each local authority to date in 2021 in terms of progressing their homeless action teams and services in tabular form. [61635/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 303 and 312 together.

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

My Department does not fund any homeless services directly but provides funding to housing authorities towards these costs. Under the funding arrangements, housing authorities must

provide at least 10% of the cost of services from their own resources. Housing authorities may also incur additional expenditure on homeless related services outside of these funding arrangements with my Department. Therefore, the exact spending by housing authorities on homeless services, as well as the types of services, are a matter for individual housing authorities in consultation with the Management Group of the relevant regional joint Homeless Consultative Forum, as provided for under Chapter 6 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009.

Exchequer funding for homeless services is provided through my Department to housing authorities on a regional basis. The funding provided for 2020 and 2021 to date is set out below:

Region	2020 €m	2021 (to date) €m
Dublin	217,535,359	138,222,775
Mid East	8,500,368	5,192,547
Midland	2,531,226	1,689,450
Mid West	9,188,376	7,174,135
North East	2,935,081	2,056,635
North West	812,285	741,000
South East	3,890,374	3,419,833
South West	16,247,187	11,204,928
West	9,259,668	6,814,185
Total	270,899,923	176,515,489

Certified financial reports, which provide a breakdown of expenditure for each region, are published annually on my Department's website at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/collection/80ea8-homelessness-data/#local-authority-regional-financial-reports.

Certified financial reports for 2021 will be collated early in 2022 on receipt of final end of year financial reports.

Departmental Strategies

304. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the disabled persons strategy as announced in the Housing for All policy; if it is still due to be published in quarter 4 2021 as committed to; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61621/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): The current National Housing Strategy for People with a Disability will come to an end this year. A new National Housing Strategy for Disabled People 2022-2027, building on the progress made to date, is being readied for publication before the end of the year.

The strategy and its implementation plan, which will be developed early next year, will set our vision and represent a roadmap to facilitate access for disabled people to a range of housing and related support services, delivered in an integrated and sustainable manner, and promoting equality of opportunity, individual choice and independent living.

Question No. 305 answered with Question No. 260.

Traveller Accommodation

306. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his Department has considered transient sites and service areas for Travellers that would be a co-ordinated approach between local authorities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61623/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): The Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998 provides that housing authorities have statutory responsibility for the assessment of the accommodation needs of Travellers and the preparation, adoption and implementation of multi-annual Traveller Accommodation Programmes (TAPs) in their areas. This assessment is across a range of accommodation options including standard social housing and Traveller specific accommodation such as group housing schemes and permanent and transient halting sites.

The Traveller Accommodation Expert Group report includes a recommendation presented in the context of the provision of transient sites which the Programme Board established by my Department will consider in due course.

My Department's role is to ensure that there are adequate structures and supports in place to assist the authorities in providing for the accommodation needs of Travellers, including a national framework of policy, legislation and funding.

Defective Building Materials

307. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the exact item which must be proven by the IS:465 assessment in order for sampling to confirm the presence of said material and to be included in the scheme (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61624/21]

310. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the precise technical data that is being sought at present from Clare County Council in order to determine if the deleterious material is present in block in homes in County Clare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61627/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 307 and 310 together.

My Department received a submission from Clare County Council, dated 23 July 2021, requesting the extension of the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant scheme to County Clare. A response issued to the Council on 3 August 2021 indicating that my Department would review the submission and it also sought a detailed breakdown of costs associated with the Report. A breakdown of costs associated with the Report was received on 28 September 2021.

In order to progress matters a meeting was held on 9 November 2021 between officials from my Department and Clare County Council to review issues which require further elaboration in order to evidentially support an extension of the defective concrete blocks grant scheme to County Clare.

Clare County Council undertook to review their submission in light of the discussion which took place and address the gaps in evidential data which have been identified by my Department. In that regard, the relevant local authority are to continue to take the lead, build on the good work to date and demonstrate damage which has been documented has manifested due to the presence of reactive pyrite, which is crucial for applicants in the existing scheme.

My Department is eager to progress this matter and to that end, issued a correspondence to Clare County Council on the 6 December 2021 outlining formally the nature of clarifications sought.

Any extension of the Scheme to Clare and indeed other local authority areas was considered as part of wider deliberations on the Scheme by Government. To that end, I brought a memorandum to Government on 30 November 2021, setting out proposals for improvements to the existing Scheme. Included as part of these improvements, I as Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, may, with Government approval, extend the scheme beyond the counties of Donegal and Mayo to additional counties, where the evidence supports such an extension.

On receipt by my Department of the clarifications sought, progress can be made on the requested extension of the scheme to County Clare.

Defective Building Materials

308. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his views on whether there is an issue of discrepancies in testing regimes if local authorities have to foot the bill for testing for deleterious materials themselves; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61625/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department informed those local authorities requesting an extension to the Defective Concrete Block Scheme, that before any extension can be considered, the same rigorous analysis as that put in place prior to the rollout of the scheme to the counties of Donegal and Mayo would have to be undertaken.

Local authorities are to take a lead role in determining, in accordance with the IS: 465 protocol, that issues arising in homes in their local authority area are in fact due to the presence of excessive amounts of deleterious materials (mica or pyrite) in the aggregate used to manufacture the concrete blocks and, secondly, quantify the likely extent of the problem in the county.

My Department, in asking local authorities to take on this lead role, has committed to covering all reasonable costs incurred them by them in this regard. There is therefore no question of local authorities being required to cover the testing costs arising from this work or there being any resulting discrepancy in their approach to testing.

Defective Building Materials

309. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his attention has been drawn to the fact that across media channels the defective block grant scheme is repeatedly mooted as a mica redress scheme and that this is impacting very negatively on persons in County Clare who are of the view that they will be excluded from the prospective scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61626/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks in Construction (Remediation) (Financial Assistance) Regulations 2020 provide for a grant scheme of financial assistance to support affected homeowners in the counties of Donegal and Mayo to carry out the necessary remediation works to dwellings that have been damaged due to the use of defective concrete blocks.

Whilst the terms mica or pyrite scheme are used widely in media reporting my Department can confirm that the correct name for the scheme is the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant Scheme. Any extension of the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant Scheme to additional local authority areas will ensure that homeowners in those counties, whose homes are impacted by excessive amounts of reactive pyrite or mica in the blockwork, in accordance with the IS:465 protocol and the scheme regulations and guidance, would be eligible to apply for grant assistance to help with the cost of necessary remediation works.

Question No. 310 answered with Question No. 307.

Defective Building Materials

311. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the reason that no County Clare representative was present on the working group despite commitments to include homeowners from all affected regions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61633/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): It is important to note that the work of the Defective Concrete Block working group completed earlier this year with the final meeting of the group taking place on 29 September 2021. I received the final output report in early October which is available on the Departments website

No commitment was given to extend the participation of the Working Group to persons or groups residing outside of Donegal or Mayo. Other interested parties sought admittance onto the Working Group but homeowners were restricted to those from counties within the scope of the Scheme.

The Defective Concrete Blocks Working Group which I established, was tasked with a review of issues of concern which had been raised by homeowners in respect of the current scheme, which applies to Mayo and Donegal only. Under the agreed Terms of Reference, one of the areas in scope for review was the issue of "Eligible Homes". This aspect of the review covered excluded homes in the counties of Donegal and Mayo and homes in local authority areas not currently in the Scheme.

It was considered that homeowners from Donegal and Mayo, who made up 50% of the working group, could adequately represent the views of homeowners who may be affected, regardless of their location.

Any extension of the Scheme to Clare and indeed other local authority areas was considered as part of wider deliberations on the Scheme by Government. To that end, I brought a Memorandum to Government on 30 November 2021, setting out proposals for improvements to the existing Scheme. Included as part of these improvements, I as Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, may, with Government approval, extend the scheme beyond the counties of Donegal and Mayo to additional counties, where the evidence supports such an extension.

On receipt by my Department of the clarifications sought from the Local Authority, progress can be made on the requested extension of the scheme to County Clare.

Question No. 312 answered with Question No. 303.

Tax Exemptions

313. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if homeowners in County Clare affected by the material, pyrite, are eligible for the local property tax exemption; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61636/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Local Property Tax (LPT) exemption formulated by the Department of Finance only applies to homes which have received a Stage 1 approval – Confirmation of Eligibility letter under the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant Scheme. Homeowners outside of Donegal and Mayo are not currently entitled to apply for a Stage 1 approval and therefore an LPT exemption.

If the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant Scheme is extended to other local authority areas homeowners in those areas who are impacted will be entitled to apply for a Stage 1 Confirmation of Eligibility. If approved, an exemption from LPT will apply under the terms of the available exemption.

Defective Building Materials

314. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the decisions made at the recent meeting with Clare County Council in relation to the eligibility of homeowners in County Clare in the defective block redress scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61637/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department sought clarification from the Deputy's office regarding the meeting referred to in the Question and the response received stated it referred to a meeting on 19 November between a representative from my Department and Clare County Council officials. Neither I nor my Department are aware of this meeting.

I can confirm however that officials from my Department did meet with officials from Clare County Council on 9 November. At this meeting the clarifications required by my Department in relation to the submission from Clare County Council were outlined. Clare County Council undertook to review their submission in light of the discussion which took place and address the gaps in the evidential data which my officials have identified.

My Department is eager to progress this matter and, to that end, issued a correspondence to Clare County Council on 6 December 2021 outlining in writing the full details of the clarifications sought.

On receipt by my Department of the necessary clarifications I am confident that progress can be made on the requested extension of the scheme to County Clare.

Housing Schemes

315. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the expected date for the launch of the affordable purchase shared equity scheme; when further details of the scheme will be announced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61714/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The provisions of the Affordable Housing Act 2021 establish the basis for 4 new affordable housing measures. These measures will deliver on the Programme for Government commitment to put affordability at the heart of the housing system and prioritise the increased supply

of affordable homes through:

- delivering affordable homes for purchase on local authority lands;

- the introduction of a new form of tenure in Cost Rental;

- a new affordable purchase 'First Home' shared equity scheme; and

- expanding Part V planning requirements to increase the 10% contribution requirement to 20% and to apply it to cost rental as well as social and affordable housing.

First Home is one of the measures in Housing for All that will help deliver 54,000 new affordable homes up to 2030, 36,000 of which will be for affordable purchase, and 18,000 of which will be for cost rental.

First Home will support hard pressed first-time buyers to purchase new homes in private developments, will also help address viability concerns, and stimulate an increase in supply to meet increased demand.

The support available under First Home will help bridge the gap for eligible purchasers between the deposit and mortgage available to them, and the sale price of the home they wish to buy. The scheme will allow people paying high rents to instead use their income to pay down a mortgage and own their own home.

Under the scheme, new homes made available nationally to first-time buyers will be subject to regional price ceilings linked to the median price of new build homes. It is anticipated that the scheme will support in the region of 8,000 households over the years 2022 to 2026.

Work on the detailed design and operation of the scheme is ongoing. The full scheme details will be confirmed on completion of this work. A new entity which will operate First Home is currently being established, and it is intended that further stakeholder and public engagement will be undertaken in preparation for deployment of the scheme in Q2 2022.

Planning Issues

316. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the legal costs pertaining to his Department and An Bord Pleanála and their related agencies in respect of all legal services provided in all appeal and judicial review applications instituted against his Department or An Bord Pleanála by case in each of the years since January 2016; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61741/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The information requested is being compiled and will be forwarded to the Deputy in accordance with Standing Orders.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

317. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will extend the targeted commercial rates waiver scheme to other targeted businesses, including hospitality reliant businesses such as dry cleaning, which have been more severely impacted than the businesses currently included in the waiver scheme; if he will consider the fact that these hospitality reliant businesses have been devastated in a downturn in the hospi-

tality sector due to wedding and restaurant cancellations and to the prevalence of online meetings and the practice of working from home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61746/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): The Government recouped €729m to local authorities to fund the cost of a rates waiver in 2020. This meant that for eligible businesses their commercial rates were funded by Government for nine months of 2020. €480m was allocated by Government to fund the cost of the nine month waiver this year. These are unprecedented measures, which offered support to businesses and financial certainty to local authorities.

The Government, in Budget 2022, announced a more targeted commercial rates waiver for Q4 2021 to cover the hospitality and tourism sectors and €62.3m was allocated by Government for this purpose. On 3 December an extension of the current targeted waiver covering the hospitality and tourism sectors was announced. These waivers are intended to assist specific sectors as they continue to be severely impacted by COVID-19 restrictions beyond September 2021 and need support to get back up and running.

Local authorities levy rates on property used for commercial purposes in accordance with the details entered in the valuation lists prepared by the independent Commissioner of Valuation under the Valuation Acts 2001 to 2015. Valuation lists identify categories of commercial property. Because of this, commercial rates and consequently eligibility for the rates waiver schemes, are based on property categories. Eligibility for the Q4 waiver is mainly based on hospitality and tourism property categories.

Government has the challenge of balancing competing demands for finite resources. The Q4 2001 and Q1 2002 targeted rates waivers are separate, standalone schemes and in recognition of the resources available, many businesses that benefited from previous waivers are no longer eligible. As with all public health measures and associated supports, the waiver of commercial rates will be kept under review. However, there are no current plans to extend the scope of the commercial rates waiver.

Planning Issues

318. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if there are plans to amend planning laws to address the planting of non-native leylandii in urban areas. [61867/21]

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

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

addressed in any such provisions.

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

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

In relation to dangerous trees, section 70 of the Roads Act 1993 - which is the responsibility of my colleague, the Minister for Transport – provides that, where a tree, shrub, hedge or other vegetation is a hazard or potential hazard to persons using a public road or where it obstructs or interferes with the safe use of a public road or with the maintenance of a public road, a road authority may serve a notice in writing on the owner or occupier of the land on which such tree, shrub, hedge or other vegetation is situated, requiring the preservation, felling, cutting, lopping, trimming or removal of such tree, shrub, hedge or other vegetation within the period stated in the notice.

I also understand that under Section 58 of the Communications Regulation Act 2002 – which comes under the remit of my colleague, the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications - an electronic communications network operator or any person authorised by the operator may lop or cut any tree, shrub or hedge which obstructs or interferes with any physical infrastructure of the network operator.

With regard to tall and dangerous trees on local authority property, local authorities - as with all landowners - are responsible for the safety and maintenance of trees on their land.

Housing Provision

319. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the total spend by his Department, by approved housing bodies and by each of the local authorities on the construction of new housing in 2018, 2019 and 2020; the share of that spend that is attributable to labour costs; the average spend per unit of housing in the same period; the share of that spend that is attributable to labour costs in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61874/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department publishes comprehensive programme level statistics on social housing delivery activity on a quarterly basis. Details on the number of social housing units provided by local authorities is published on the statistics page of my Department's website, at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/publication/6d316-local-authority-housing-scheme-statistics/?referrer; www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/local-authority-housing-scheme-statistics.

Cost information on the delivery of social homes through the various construction streams, is collated by my Department at development level rather than at individual housing unit level. Disaggregating such development level information into individual unit costs, across all of the

various types of units, would require significant analysis on unit characteristics such as size, type, number of bedrooms, site costs, abnormal costs, fees, etc. to derive an accurate reflection of unit cost.

In October 2020, the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, published an 'Analysis of Social Housing Build Programme' which examined the social housing build programme over the years 2016 to 2019 and considered issues such as Use of Build Delivery; Type of Units, Cost & Speed of Delivery and Cost Efficiency and Market Interaction. The IGEES analysis noted the range of average costs which highlighted the diversity of costs for delivery of new build units across different developments and locations. The paper is available at the following link: www.assets.gov.ie/94919/88a04762-9b47-45ba-a24c-e09f271234b9.pdf.

My Department provides funding to local authorities as projects and schemes are progressed and as relevant claims fall due for recoupment.

In respect of Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs), the funding is provided by my Department directly to local authorities, who, in turn, advance the funding to the AHBs, as appropriate.

Details of housing expenditure under the housing build delivery stream for the years 2018, 2019 and 2020, by each individual local authority is set out in the table below, and includes the funding provided in respect of AHB delivery.

Local Authority	2018 €m	2019 €m	2020 €m
Carlow	6.03	14.71	10.11
Cavan	3.02	4.22	6.32
Clare	3.67	11.98	14.23
Cork City	42.31	55.43	80.52
Cork County	53.99	65.54	70.46
Donegal	10.36	9.86	17.28
Dún Laoghaire/Rathdown	25.89	10.20	29.88
Dublin City	152.97	100.80	132.11
Fingal	61.06	58.59	54.01
Galway City	11.23	21.96	30.94
Galway County	12.33	15.95	35.47
Kerry	19.96	22.32	36.79
Kildare	27.83	59.18	60.09
Kilkenny	18.72	12.66	21.79
Laois	1.87	6.06	10.73
Leitrim	1.46	3.21	5.78
Limerick	50.21	40.20	48.54
Longford	9.40	15.56	8.42
Louth	12.57	28.01	65.86
Mayo	6.62	19.38	15.79
Meath	38.58	42.68	57.24
Monaghan	8.64	12.32	16.49
Offaly	3.42	12.82	7.15

Local Authority	2018 €m	2019 €m	2020 €m
Roscommon	1.62	4.06	5.36
Sligo	10.10	12.76	10.52
South Dublin	67.53	52.51	32.74
Tipperary	4.27	13.57	22.90
Waterford	29.39	27.41	20.41
Westmeath	6.37	10.28	10.09
Wexford	15.63	21.79	19.88
Wicklow	24.19	42.91	69.97
Total	741.24	828.93	1,027.87

Departmental Data

320. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the total spend by his Department, by approved housing bodies and by each of the local authorities on the retrofitting and renovation of social housing in 2018, 2019 and 2020; and the share of that total spend that is attributable to labour costs; the average spend per unit of housing in each of the years 2018, 2019 and 2020; the share of that spend that is attributable to labour costs in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61875/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department launched the Energy Efficiency Retrofitting Programme in 2013 with the aim of funding retrofit of social homes requiring insulation and energy upgrade works. Since the programme commenced in 2013 over 73,500 units of social housing stock have been retrofitted with a total exchequer spend of €161 million under the scheme. Homes owned by Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) are not part of the local authority owned housing stock and therefore are not eligible to apply for funding under a budget dedicated to the retrofit of local authority owned homes.

The Energy Efficiency Programme has been revised in 2021 with an increased Budget of €65 million, to include the Midlands Retrofit Programme, and focuses on ensuring that the fabric of the home is upgraded and an energy efficient heating system is provided. This revised programme will see a significant upscaling to 'deeper retrofit' on what has been completed by local authorities in previous years and will target 2,400 social homes for upgrade works in 2021, 750 of which relate to the Midlands Retrofit Pilot.

Under the new programme costs on individual homes could vary from €13,000 to €45,000. The final cost on a home will depend on its pre-works building standard and energy performance. It is a matter for each local authority to choose which properties to select for retrofitting from the allocation notified to them by my Department.

An annualised breakdown of the units retrofitted under the Energy Efficiency Retrofit programme for the years 2013-2020, is available on my Department's website at the following link. Details in respect of labour costs attributed to the Programme are not captured. www.gov.ie/en/publication/668c1-energy-efficiency-retrofitting-programme-expenditure-output/.

Housing Provision

321. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and

Heritage the number of housing projects for which each of the local authorities and approved housing bodies availed of support services on procurement from the Housing Agency projects and procurement department in 2018, 2019 and 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61877/21]

322. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the way the Housing Agency projects and procurement department approaches advising local authorities and approved housing bodies on questions of labour availability and the associated cost as part of the procurement process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61878/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 321 and 322 together.

The Housing Agency is a non-commercial State agency under the aegis of my Department. The Housing Agency's Projects, Procurement and Programmes (PPP) Team supports local authorities and Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) in housing delivery through the provision of specialist advice in a range of areas, including design, regulatory compliance, project development and procurement. My Department does not hold details on the number of housing projects for which each local authority or AHB availed of support services or the details of these supports from the Housing Agency. However, further information may be available directly from the Housing Agency.

A key theme of Housing for All is to build local authority and AHB capacity to cater for increased output levels and complexities of development and delivery processes. Under Housing for All, the Housing Agency's PPP team will be expanded to support local authority and AHB delivery and my Department is working with the Agency to identify the additional resource requirements in this regard.

Question No. 322 answered with Question No. 321.

Housing Schemes

323. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when the new regulations for the affordable housing schemes will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61893/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Housing for All Strategy delivers on the Programme for Government commitment to step up housing supply and put affordability at the heart of the housing system, with an ambitious target of 300,000 homes over the next decade for social, affordable and cost rental, private rental and private ownership housing.

Measures to deliver this housing are supported by over €4 billion in funding annually, representing the highest ever level of Government investment in building social and affordable housing. 54,000 affordable homes interventions will be delivered between now and 2030 to be facilitated by local authorities, Approved Housing Bodies, the Land Development Agency and through a strategic partnership between the State and retail banks. From this figure, there will be 36,000 affordable purchase and 18,000 Cost Rental homes.

The delivery of affordable housing under Housing for All is being facilitated through a number of affordable schemes. These schemes will assist potential purchasers and renters in making housing more affordable. The Affordable Housing Act 2021 sets out the legislative basis for

several such schemes, including a Local Authority Affordable Purchase scheme, the basis for a Cost Rental sector in Ireland, and the 'First Home' affordable purchase shared equity scheme.

Regulations under this Act covering the Local Authority Affordable Purchase scheme and Cost Rental are currently being finalised and once complete, will include information in relation to income and eligibility. It is anticipated that a number of these Regulations will be in published before year end, with the remainder in January 2022.

Planning Issues

324. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when the new rural planning guidelines will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61894/21]

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

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

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

National Policy Objective (NPO) 15 of the NPF fully supports the concept of the sustainable development of rural areas by encouraging growth and arresting decline in areas that have experienced low population growth or decline in recent decades, while simultaneously indicating the need to manage certain areas around cities and towns.

Updated Rural Housing Planning Guidelines are currently being prepared by my Department to ensure consistency with new requirements and legislation at national and EU level introduced in respect of areas related to rural housing such as environmental protection, the Gaeltacht and climate action. The new guidelines will ensure a more consistent approach between counties and alignment with NPF objectives, and will be prepared in draft in quarter one of 2022.

Planning Issues

325. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when the new guidelines for local authorities on residential densities will be published; and

if he will make a statement on the matter. [61895/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): A key outcome of both of the National Planning Framework (NPF) and the National Development Plan (NDP) is the compact growth of cities and towns of all sizes, in a manner that creates more attractive places in which people can live and work. The preferred approach is to focus on greater reuse of previously developed 'brownfield' land, consolidating infill sites, which may not have been built on before, and the development of sites in locations that are better serviced by existing facilities and public transport.

The NPF also acknowledges that there is a need for a more proportionate and tailored approach to residential development, especially in the context of regional cities and towns. This means that it is necessary to adapt the scale, design and layout of new housing according to the type of settlement in which it is located, and its proximity to centres and public transport services.

Statutory 'Section 28' ministerial guidelines for planning authorities on Sustainable Residential Development in Urban Areas (the 'Sustainable Residential Development Guidelines') were last issued in 2009, having been first introduced in 1999.

Further, related guidance has been subsequently issued in the form of updates to the Sustainable Urban Housing: Design Standards for New Apartments Guidelines for Planning Authorities, most recently in 2020, and the Urban Development and Building Heights Guidelines for Planning Authorities in 2018.

While the principles, approaches and general requirements of the Sustainable Residential Development Guidelines continue to be applicable to the objectives of the NPF for the development of compact, sustainable and liveable settlements, it is necessary to review guidance to take account of more varied development contexts, given the emphasis that the NPF places on tailored, plan-led and design-focused compact growth.

My Department is currently undertaking an update of the Sustainable Residential Development Guidelines with new Sustainable and Compact Settlement Guidelines (SCSG). In the meantime, my Department issued a Circular in April 2021 to Planning Authorities, Regional Assemblies and to the Planning Regulator to provide clarity in relation to the interpretation and application of current statutory guidelines, particularly with regard to the density of development in certain town contexts.

A preliminary draft of the SCSG is currently being prepared for the purposes of screening for Appropriate Assessment and Strategic Environmental Assessment. Following the completion of the AA/SEA process, the Draft SCSG will be subject to a period of consultation. Submissions made during the public consultation period will be taken into consideration and thereafter, the draft guidelines will be finalised for publication. It is intended that the review can conclude by mid-2022 and that final Guidelines will be issued under Section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended).

Housing Provision

326. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of social housing units completed to date in 2021; and the breakdown by social housing investment programme, SHIP construction, SHIP turnkey, the capital advance leasing facility, CALF, construction, CALF turnkey, capital assistance scheme, CAS, construction, CAS turnkey, Part V purchase, Part V lease, PPP and other. [61896/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department publishes comprehensive programme level statistics on social housing delivery for each local authority on a quarterly basis. The statistics are available to the end of Quarter 3 and are published on the statistics page of my Department's website, at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/collection/6060e-overall-social-housing-provision/.

In addition to the statistical overview of activity in each local authority, a detailed Social Housing Construction Status Report (CSR) is published each quarter, which provides scheme level detail on new build activity. The most recent publication covers the period up to the end of Quarter 3 2021 and is available at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/publication/feea9-social-housing-construction-projects-status-report-q3-2021/. The CSR provides details of the individual projects that make up the new Build programme for each local authority.

An excel version of this file can be downloaded at the following link: data.gov.ie/dataset/social-housing-construction-status-report-q3-2021?package_type=dataset. Data on Part V delivery can be found at following link: www.gov.ie/en/collection/fd048-affordable-housing-and-part-v-statistics/.

Housing Schemes

327. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of social housing tenancies created to date in 2021 under the long-term leasing scheme, the housing assistance payment, HAP, and the rental accommodation scheme, RAS. [61897/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department publishes comprehensive statistics on social housing, including Leasing, Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS), on a quarterly basis.

Long term leasing forms part of the overall social housing leasing delivery which also includes delivery streams such as Mortgage to Rent Scheme, the Repair and Leasing Scheme (RLS) and the Enhanced Leasing Scheme. At the end of Q3 2021, a total of 1,576 homes have been delivered through the social housing leasing delivery stream, of which 948 homes have been delivered through long term leasing.

Statistics in relation to HAP and RAS can be found at the following link under the relevant headings: www.gov.ie/en/collection/6060e-overall-social-housing-provision/.

Under the Housing for All strategy, the Government plans to increase the supply of housing to an average of 33,000 homes per year over the next decade, including an average of 10,000 new build social homes. As new build supply of social housing ramps up, there will be reducing reliance on HAP and RAS.

Long Term Leasing will be phased out by 2025. This process is already underway and my officials have begun engaging with local authorities in this regard.

Housing Schemes

328. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of new mortgage to rent tenancies funded by his Department from the start of 2021 to date. [61898/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Mortgage to Rent (MTR) scheme introduced in 2012 is targeted at supporting households in mortgage arrears who have had their mortgage position deemed unsustainable by their lender under the Mortgage Arrears Resolution Process (MARP); agree to the voluntary surrender of their home and are deemed eligible for social housing support. The property in question must also meet certain eligibility criteria. The concept of the scheme is that a household with an unsustainable mortgage goes from being a homeowner to being a social housing tenant. The borrower surrenders their property to their lender who sells it to a MTR provider which can be either an Approved Housing Body (AHB) or since 2018 a private company, Home for Life Ltd. The AHB or local authority (in the case where the property is sold to a private company) becomes the landlord and the borrower remains in the property as a tenant paying a differential rent to the landlord based on his or her income.

From the start of 2021 to the end of September 2021, 493 households, with unsustainable private mortgages have completed the MTR scheme. Since its introduction nationally in 2013, a total of 1497 cases have been completed up to the end of September 2021. As of that date, 850 active cases were also being progressed under the scheme. The Housing Agency publishes, on a quarterly basis, detailed statistical information on the operation of the MTR scheme which shows a breakdown of the number of active, completed, ineligible and terminated cases. This information is available on the Housing Agency's website at the following link: www.housingagency.ie/housing-information/mortgage-rent-statistics.

Housing Provision

329. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of affordable homes delivered to date in 2021 under the affordable housing fund and the cost rental equity loan providing the locations and prices of the homes to rent and buy. [61899/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Covid-19 pandemic, and associated closure and restrictions of construction sites, had significant impacts on the anticipated timelines for the delivery for Cost Rental Equity Loan (CREL) and Affordable Housing Fund (AHF, previously known as the Serviced Site Fund (SSF)) supported housing developments.

Notwithstanding these obstacles, 25 Cost Rental units supported by CREL were tenanted in 2021 in Taylor Hill, Co. Dublin with rents ranging between €900 and €1,250, an average of 40% below comparative market rates. A further 40 CREL-supported Cost Rental units will be tenanted before year-end (Barnhall, Co Kildare, with rents starting from €900 per month). Additionally, under the first round of CREL funding alone, 325 Cost Rental units will be delivered in 2022, across 4 local authorities.

In relation to SSF/AHF supported housing developments, notwithstanding the impact of Covid-19, 50 Cost Rental two bedroomed homes supported through the SSF/AHB have reached completion, with the tenanting process being finalised (Enniskerry Road, Co. Dublin, with rents of €1,200 per month). The first SSF/AHF-supported affordable homes for purchase will be available to purchase in Cork city in Q1 2022 (Boherboy, Cork City Council indicated prices to be €218,000 for a 2-bedroom and €243,000 for a 3-bedroom dwelling). This will be followed by a Fingal County Council supported affordable purchase development (Dun Emer, Fingal County Council have indicated these will cost €166,000 for a 2-bed apartment and between 206,000 and €258,000 for 3-bed dwellings).

In addition to the CREL and SSF/AHF supported affordable homes, in 2021 several Local Authorities have collaborated with Ó Cualann Co-Housing Alliance to deliver affordable homes for purchase. Under such arrangements, Local Authority-owned development land is provided at nominal cost and development levies are reduced or eliminated. The most recently completed phase through such arrangements will deliver a total of 37 affordable homes for purchase by year-end (Oileáin na Crannóige extension).

Under the Government's Housing for All strategy, the AHF and CREL scheme are two important components in delivering the 54,000 affordable homes targeted between now and 2030. But additional delivery streams will also be required. Recognizing this, the Government brought forward first standalone affordable housing legislation in the Affordable Housing Act 2021. This will support the implementation of a multi-faceted approach which, combined with unprecedented levels of funding, will allow a huge scale-up in the near and medium delivery of affordable homes.

Examples of new affordable housing interventions include;

- A second round of CREL funding was launched on 22 October, and applications for this are currently being assessed. Approval-in-principle will be issued to successful applications before year-end.

- The Land Development Agency initiated a call under Project Tosaigh on 12 November focused on kick-starting stalled private developments and securing additional affordable homes. This call targeted scale in excess of 150 affordable units per development.

- Similarly, the Housing Delivery Coordination Office (within the LGMA) issued a call to secure additional affordable homes across key local authorities from stalled private developments, targeting smaller scale private developments.

- Significant progress is being made in establishing the First Home Affordable Purchase Shared Equity scheme. The First Home scheme is designed to support first-time buyers purchasing homes on the private market, and will be available at a national level for applications next year.

- The Croí Cónaithe initiative is in the final stages of design. This initiative focuses on overcoming the viability challenges associated with un-activated planning permissions in urban brownfield areas, estimated at 80,000 dwellings nationally. It is intended that the first calls under this initiative will be made in January.

Approved Housing Bodies

330. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the process to establish an approved housing body; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61913/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Following on from the introduction of the Housing (Regulation of Approved Housing Bodies) Act 2019, the Approved Housing Bodies Regulatory Authority (AHBRA) was formally established on the 1st of February 2021. The Regulator will have responsibility for, inter alia, establishing and maintaining a register of AHBs; preparing standards by which AHBs will be monitored and assessed; encouraging and facilitating the better governance, administration and management, including corporate governance and financial management, of AHBs. The Regulator will also have powers to carry out investigations and cancel the registration of AHBs.

From early 2022 AHBRA will accept applications to register from new organisations that meet the eligibility criteria. In addition to the necessary eligibility criteria, organisations must provide certain information as part of the application for registration. The relevant information is available from the AHBRA website at the following link: www.ahbregulator.ie/registration/.

AHBRA have advised my Department that they will engage with any organisation to assist with the registration process, and can be contacted at info@ahbregulator.ie.

Approved Housing Bodies

331. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the details of all approved housing bodies in the State; the number of social, affordable and other type of housing units analysed by local authority area under their ownership and or management; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61914/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): There are currently 450 organisations listed on my Department's Register of Housing Bodies with Approved Status. Further information is available at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/publication/1172c-register-of-housing-bodies-with-approved-status-under-section-6-of-the-housing-miscellaneous-provisions-act-1992/

The table below provides information on of the number of Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) signed up to the Voluntary Regulatory Code, which are active in each local authority, along with the number of units either owned, managed or leased. This information is sourced from the most recent Sectoral Analysis Report produced by the Housing Agency's Regulation Office www.housingagency.ie/sites/default/files/2021-07/Regulation%20Annual%20Report%202020%20FINAL.pdf which provides a comprehensive overview of the AHB sector.

Local Authority	No. of AHBs operating in Local Authority*	No. of Units**
Dublin City	48	8756
Limerick City & County	46	1787
Cork County	40	2414
Dun Laoghaire – Rathdown	32	1767
Kilkenny	31	1044
Cork City	30	1874
Kildare	30	2021
Fingal	30	2372
Tipperary	29	1227
Meath	27	1177
South Dublin	26	2834
Mayo	24	792
Wicklow	24	746
Clare	22	655
Donegal	19	1084
Waterford City & County	19	1301
Wexford	19	954
Kerry	18	921
Galway City	17	865

Local Authority	No. of AHBs operating in Local Authority*	No. of Units**
Galway County	17	675
Offaly	17	557
Louth	17	1680
Laois	17	890
Westmeath	16	261
Sligo	14	474
Monaghan	12	366
Carlow	12	822
Cavan	11	264
Longford	10	370
Roscommon	8	207
Leitrim	7	72
Total		41229

* *Based on AHBs signed up to the Voluntary Code*

** *Based on December 2019 data*

My Department also publishes comprehensive programme level statistics on social housing delivery for each local authority on a quarterly basis. These statistics, which include programmes supported by AHB delivery, are available to the end of Quarter 3 and are published on the statistics page of my Department's website, at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/collection/6060e-overall-social-housing-provision/

In addition to the statistical overview of activity in each local authority, a detailed Social Housing Construction Status Report is published each quarter which provides scheme level detail on new build activity, including those delivered by AHBs. The most recent publication covers the period up to the end of Quarter 3 2021 and is available at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/publication/feea9-social-housing-construction-projects-status-report-q3-2021/.

Following on from the introduction of the Housing (Regulation of Approved Housing Bodies) Act 2019, the Approved Housing Bodies Regulatory Authority (AHBRA) was formally established on 1 February 2021. The Regulator will have responsibility for, inter alia, establishing and maintaining a register of AHBs; preparing standards by which AHBs will be monitored and assessed; encouraging and facilitating the better governance, administration and management, including corporate governance and financial management, of AHBs. The Regulator will have powers to carry out investigations and cancel the registration of AHBs.

The functions of the Regulator will also include collecting such information concerning AHBs as the Regulator considers necessary and appropriate for the purposes of the performance of the Regulator's functions, and publishing such information (including statistical information) concerning AHBs as the Regulator considers appropriate.

Planning Issues

332. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of persons working on the review by his Department of the planning system; the number of these who are external to his Department; and the cost to his Department of the work of these persons on the planning system review. [61921/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Housing for All sets out a number of objectives with the aim of improving the functioning of the planning system including the comprehensive review and consolidation of planning legislation. The review forms one of the actions in Housing for All and is set in the context of the broad policy outlined therein.

The review is being overseen by the Attorney General and he has appointed a working group of professionals with planning law expertise to assist him in this work, funded by his Office. My Department has established a dedicated unit headed at Principal Officer level to liaise with the Attorney General on the review.

Planning Issues

333. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his views on the growing number of judicial reviews of residential developments being lost by An Board Pleanála and the rising cost to the State of these court decisions finding against the Board; if concerns have been raised in this regard; and the action he plans to take to ensure an improvement in the legal basis of the decisions by the Board and improved cost controls to reduce the growing cost of lost judicial reviews by the Board. [61922/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): My Department has noted the increasing number of judicial review cases being taken against decisions of An Bord Pleanála (the Board) over the last couple of years, as well as the number of cases that have been lost arising from such legal challenges, many of which relate to Strategic Housing Development (SHD) cases but also cases involving environmental related issues. This upward trend in the number of judicial review challenges has led to significantly increased legal costs having to be met by the Board in defending these actions. My Department is engaging with the Board on the steps that might be taken to improve the situation.

The Planning and Development (Housing) and Residential Tenancies Act 2016 introduced new arrangements to enable planning applications for SHDs of 100 housing units or more, or student accommodation or shared accommodation developments of 200 bed spaces or more, to be made directly to the Board for determination. The sole mechanism for appealing against SHD decisions made by the Board has been by the way of judicial review challenge to the High Court, which has been a factor in the recent increased number of judicial review challenges taken against the Board.

The SHD arrangements were a temporary measure and had a legislative expiry date of 31 December 2021. This end date was subsequently extended to 25 February 2022 arising from the Covid-related extension of statutory deadlines within the planning system by 8 weeks in respect of the period March to May 2020.

However, new planning arrangements in respect of large-scale residential developments (LRDs) - as proposed in the Planning and Development (Amendment) (Large-scale Residential Developments) Bill 2021 which has recently completed all stages in the Oireachtas legislative process and is expected to come into effect in the coming days - will restore primary decision-making in respect of such developments to the local planning authorities with the possibility of subsequent appeal to the Board. It is anticipated that these new arrangements in respect of LRDs and allowing appeal to the Board will lead to a reduction in the number of judicial review challenges in this area in the future.

Furthermore, proposals to reform the judicial review provisions in sections 50 to 50B of the Planning and Development Act 2001, as amended, were published in the General Scheme of the Housing and Planning and Development Bill 2019 which were subsequently the subject of public consultation. The General Scheme is now expected to undergo pre-legislative scrutiny in the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage in Q1 2022 to be followed by legislative drafting and the publication of a Bill with a view to the subsequent coming into effect of the new judicial review reforms on the establishment of the proposed dedicated Environmental and Planning Court, as committed to in the Programme for Government - Our Shared Future. Similar to the introduction of the new LRD planning arrangements, it is anticipated that these reforms - combined with the reform of the case management procedures in the High Court arising from the Report of the Review Group on the Administration of Civil Justice chaired by the former President of the High Court, Justice Peter Kelly and wider reforms to improve the effectiveness of the planning system, including through increased digitalisation - will lead to both a reduction in the number of judicial review challenges against planning decisions, as well as the more timely determination of such challenges, in the future.

Local Authorities

334. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing; Local Government and Heritage the local authorities that do not have a permanent CEO at present; the length of time this vacancy is open in each case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61926/21]

335. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when all present vacancies for the position of CEO with local authorities will be filled; the details of the local authority involved in each case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61927/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): I propose to take Questions Nos. 334 and 335 together.

The local authorities where an interim Chief Executive is currently in situ and the date of appointment in each case are listed in the table below.

Local Authority	Date of appointment of temporary Chief Executive
Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	12/05/2021
Galway County Council	24/05/2021
Kildare County Council	01/09/2021
Limerick City and County Council	15/08/2019

Where a Chief Executive vacancy arises, section 145(6) of the Local Government Act 2001 provides for the appointment of a temporary Chief Executive. Such an appointment is made pending a permanent appointment to the position following the completion of an open advertised competition and process conducted through the Public Appointments Service.

Question No. 335 answered with Question No. 334.

Water Services

336. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the progress that has been made on the Oireachtas Report into Future Funding of Do-

mestic Water Services and the recommendations specifically in relation to private well owners; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61981/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The provisions of the Report of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Future Funding of Domestic Water Services have now been largely legislated for, as required, in the Water Services Act 2017. The Water Services Policy Statement 2018-2025 sets out the range of policy objectives across the key thematic areas of quality, conservation and future proofing which are aligned with Project Ireland 2040 (the National Planning Framework and the National Development Plans).

The National Development Plan 2021-2030 provides for almost €6bn investment by Irish Water, in the period 2021-2025, with over €4.5 billion of that total being Voted Exchequer funded. This investment includes the projects and programmes committed to in Irish Water's Capital Investment Plan 2020-2024, which projects spend of circa €6bn for capital expenditure and circa €5bn for operational expenditure.

In addition, the National Development Plan 2021-2030 includes an allocation of over €243 million in funding for the period 2021 to 2025 for non-Irish Water investment in water services infrastructure. This includes €175 million funding for the Multi-Annual Rural Water Programme, and €68.5 million funding for legacy issues in relation to Developer Provided Water Services Infrastructure, and lead pipe remediation which is a feature of public water supplies.

Following on from the recommendations contained in the 2017 Report, the Rural Water Working Group was established in 2018 to conduct a review of the wider resources and investment needs relating to the rural water sector.

In February 2019, my Department announced the Multi-Annual Rural Water Programme 2019-2021, the composition of this programme was based on recommendations from the Working Group. As part of these recommendations, the grant scheme to support improvement works for a private water supply was revised. The revised scheme, which opened for applications on 04 June 2020, brought into effect the following changes:

- A maximum grant for rehabilitation works of €3,000, an increase of 47% on the previous maximum grant level of €2,031;

- A maximum grant of €5,000 in cases where the local authority agrees that the most appropriate solution is to provide a new well.

The maximum percentage of approved costs was increased from 75% to 85%, subject to the total maximum costs of either €3,000 for well rehabilitation or €5,000 for a new well.

Recognising the role of the grant in improving quality, the water quality treatment element (typically filtration and UV treatment) qualifies for 100% funding up to a maximum of €1,000.

In implementing the revised arrangements, my Department has undertaken to conduct a review of the grant schemes, to ensure their continued alignment with policy objectives. The specifics of this review are currently being formalised. In finalising the structure and timeline for the review, consideration will be given to the most appropriate timing in order to ensure best engagement from relevant stakeholders. This review is expected to be completed next year.

The schemes are administered by the local authorities on behalf of my Department. Further details can be found on my Department's website or from each local authority.

Housing Schemes

337. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of plans for the regeneration of Pearse House and Pearse Grove in Dublin 2; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61994/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Following on from reviews of the conditions of its older flat complexes and based on the need to modernise and bring the living conditions up to acceptable levels and as part of its climate action plans, Dublin City Council (DCC) has advised my Department that they are developing a long term strategy for the redevelopment and/or refurbishment of many of these complexes. This is a matter for DCC in the first instance.

With regards to Pearse House, due to the large size and scope of the complex, the regeneration of the complex will be carried out on a phased basis over a number of years.

In April 2021, my Department issued Stage 1 Approval for the first phase of the regeneration of Pearse House, Dublin 2. The approved regeneration proposal involves the full deep retrofit and amalgamation of existing flats in Blocks L, M, N and P also known as the "small flats".

DCC has advised that its architects have prepared a design brief to commence the procurement of a design team who will develop and finalise a plan for the new housing scheme. DCC expect to have the external design team appointed and working on progressing development design by Q2 2022.

They have also advised that consultation with Pearse House residents, and elected members, will commence in the coming months.

My Department has not received any proposals for the regeneration of Pearse Grove.

Waterways Issues

338. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the measures that will be implemented at an early date to progress the proposal to extend the Shannon navigation from Lough Allen, County Leitrim to Dowra, County Cavan in view of the substantial preparatory work carried out on the project some years ago; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62010/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): The navigation to Lough Allen through the Lough Allen Canal was restored and re-opened in 1994. Since then, Waterways Ireland has developed and maintained facilities for boats at a number of key locations including a significant marina development at Cleighran More and harbour facilities at Spenser Harbour.

Waterways Ireland has recently received planning approval for the development of a boat slipway at Spenser Harbour, which will complement and augment the harbour as a boating amenity and will provide much needed access to that area of Lough Allen. At the same time, Waterways Ireland in association with Leitrim County Council has developed the Shannon Blueway utilising the Lough Allen Canal and the wider north Shannon area which is bringing increasing numbers of visitors to the canal and to the wider area in general.

With regard to the extension of navigation to Dowra, Waterways Ireland does not have immediate plans to progress this proposal. Waterways Ireland, together with Fáilte Ireland and the

10 Local Authorities, including Cavan and Leitrim, has formulated and is currently implementing the Shannon Tourism Masterplan.

The Masterplan is the first time a single, holistic and dedicated plan of any type has been undertaken on the Shannon Region. Based on three core themes, seven strategic signature initiatives are proposed that will when delivered, position the Shannon Region as a distinctive and sustainable tourist destination.

The initiatives are as follows:

1. Communicating a clear and consistent message;
2. Enhancing the on-water experience;
3. Enhancing the waterside experience;
4. Animating and enhancing the Shannon towns and villages;
5. Protecting and enhancing the Shannon Environment;
6. Improving connectivity; and
7. Building networks.

The potential restoration of disused navigations for recreational purposes including their expanded and wider use forms part of Strategic Signature Initiative 3 (Enhancing the on-water experience). However no firm proposals in relation to this have yet been progressed.

Passport Services

339. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a passport application by a person (details supplied) will be processed on time to travel home to see family members. [61137/21]

340. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a passport application by a person (details supplied) will be processed on time for an applicant in order that they can travel with their family. [61138/21]

360. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the passport application of a person (details supplied) will be examined; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61757/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 339, 340 and 360 together.

With regard to the specific applications about which the Deputies have enquired, the Passport Service has provided an update on the status of the passport application to the applicant.

Question No. 340 answered with Question No. 339.

EU Bodies

341. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of his Department's strategy to increase the number of persons working in European Union institutions;

and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61179/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Government's strategy to increase Irish representation in European Union Institutions and Agencies, *A Career for EU*, was launched in May of this year. This strategy contains a number of measures to ensure that more Irish people secure roles in the EU's Institutions over the coming years. Many Irish officials have shaped policies and decisions that have had a positive impact on our lives in Ireland and on the lives of all EU citizens. With a number of Irish officials set to retire over the coming years, this new strategy seeks to safeguard the presence of Irish voices in the Union for years to come.

The strategy contains a number of commitments that will promote career opportunities in the EU and equip Irish people with the skills they need to succeed in obtaining positions in the EU institutions. In particular, the Government commits to expand the existing EU Jobs campaign, provide tailored support and training to Irish candidates, provide additional resources dedicated to supporting the use of Irish as an EU language, increase the funding of the Centrally Funded Scheme for Seconded National Experts, expand the current scholarship programme in the College of Europe and create a stream within the Irish civil service for EU specialists.

Implementation of this new strategy began over the summer with a number of meetings with other Government Departments and stakeholders. Following discussions with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, it was agreed that the number of annual scholarships for Irish students to the College of Europe would be increased from three to six for the academic year 2022-23. I would hope that this will increase to 10 scholarships thereafter.

Actions linked to the strategy have been expanded, including outreach to third level institutions and regular webinars on forthcoming job opportunities in EU Institutions which have been hosted by Ireland's Permanent Representation to the EU. Training and supports for Irish candidates applying for permanent positions in the EU are also available from the Department's EU Jobs website. These supports are now available in Irish and further resources are currently being translated into Irish. Funding for the Centrally Funded Scheme for Seconded National Experts, which provides for the secondment of Irish civil servants to the EU Institutions, has been increased from €2 million to €3 million. From 24 Seconded National Experts under the scheme last May, the CFS now supports 35 and is building towards 50. This scheme is vitally important for building and expanding our EU expertise across the civil service and in areas of strategic priority for Ireland in the EU.

Preliminary work on the establishment of an EU specialist stream within the Irish civil service is also underway. Such a stream will develop expertise of European policy within the civil service, as well as providing a supply of Irish candidates qualified to sit the EU graduate level *concours* competitions. The Department, through the Permanent Representation in Brussels, is also campaigning for reform of the EU recruitment process in order to address geographical imbalances across Member States. We are following closely developments on the European Commission's new HR Strategy and are working alongside like-minded Member States to make the case for reforms, including nationality-based competitions.

Citizenship Applications

342. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the progress to date in the determination of an application for dual citizenship in the case of a person (details supplied); when the application will be finalised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61192/21]

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.

The processing of Foreign Birth Registration has resumed and will be gradually scaling up in line with the recruitment of additional resources. Due to the complex nature of the Foreign Birth Registration process and the pause in the Service due to necessary Covid-19 restrictions, applicants are being advised that they should allow approximately 2 years from the receipt of supporting documentation for processing of Foreign Birth Registration applications at this time.

With regard to the specific application about which the Deputy has enquired, no supporting documentation has been received for this application. Without supporting documentation, this application cannot be progressed. Once submitted, supporting documentation will be stored in a secure environment until the application can be checked for entitlement.

Foreign Birth Registration 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 Foreign Birth Registration applications currently on hand.

Official Travel

343. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he plans to visit Canada early in 2022. [61293/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland has a strong and flourishing bilateral relationship with Canada. Our two nations share deep historic ties and enjoy strong trading relations. Over the centuries, Canada has been an important destination for Irish immigrants. Today, over 4.5 million Canadians - more than 14% of the country's population – claim direct Irish ancestry.

The Government continues to commit additional resources to the Ireland-Canada relationship. In addition to our Embassy in Ottawa, a new Consulate General of Ireland was opened in Vancouver in October 2018, and we will further expand our presence in Canada with the opening of a new Consulate General in Toronto in 2022.

People-to-people connections are the foundation of our excellent relations and provide particularly valuable opportunities to further deepen the important economic and cultural links that exist between Ireland and Canada. This year alone, I have had two very fruitful virtual meetings with my former counterpart, then Canadian Foreign Minister Marc Garneau. I also warmly recall my visit to Canada for St. Patrick's Day in 2017.

While I have no confirmed plans at the moment, I very much look forward to visiting Canada again at an appropriate opportunity.

Passport Services

344. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a passport application by a person (details supplied) will be examined; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

[61321/21]

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

Northern Ireland

345. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the recommendations presented by a person (details supplied) to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement in June 2019 were implemented. [61196/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Stormont House Agreement was reached in 2014 after a period of intense negotiation by the Irish and British Governments and the political parties in Northern Ireland. 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 and it should be implemented for the benefit of the families and in support of reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

The approach to be taken in legislation by the two Governments was the subject of extensive further discussion with the political parties in the talks that led to the Fresh Start Agreement in 2015 and in the talks at Stormont Castle in 2017. A detailed draft of UK legislation was developed, and the British Government held a public consultation on this in 2018-9. However, the legislation process stalled at tat point. The now published proposals of the British Government with respect to legacy and a statute of limitations is not something that the Government can support. 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.

We will continue to work for the implementation of this collectively agreed framework, in order to support wider societal reconciliation, build greater community confidence in policing and meet the legitimate needs of victims and survivors in Northern Ireland and across the island of Ireland. All recommendations, ideas and concerns with regard to the Agreement's implementation, including those of Dr. Thomas Leahy, are valuable contributions to this debate and have been considered as we have worked for the implementation of the agreement; such contributions will continue to be of importance and value as we seek to make progress on these very sensitive issues.

United Nations

346. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs further to Parliamentary Question No. 71 of 2 December 2021, if his attention has been drawn to a series of matters (details supplied) in relation to the policy of the handing of names of human rights activists to the Chinese government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61324/21]

347. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs further to Parliamentary Question No. 71 of 2 December 2021, if he can provide evidence to support his response that the policy changed in 2015; if he or his Department ever requested evidence from UN Office of

the High Commissioner for Human Rights in relation to whether there has been a change in policy in view of the contradictory public positions and documented instances of diplomats being told untruths in relation to this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61325/21]

348. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs further to Parliamentary Question No. 71 of 2 December 2021, if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the United Nations found a person guilty of misconduct for unauthorized communications with external parties in relation to issues concerning the official activities of the United Nations which communications consisted entirely of reporting this policy to member states; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61326/21]

349. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs further to Parliamentary Question No. 71 of 2 December 2021, his views on the opinion expressed by the United Nations that a person committed misconduct by reporting this policy and should have remained silent; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61327/21]

350. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs further to Parliamentary Question No. 71 of 2 December 2021, if his attention has been drawn to the fact that a person revealed the identity of the whistle-blower directly to the Chief of the Human Rights Council Branch of UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in 2016; if his attention has been further drawn to the fact that the whistle-blower reported a significant increase in the retaliation against them following that event; if it is the policy of the Government to reveal the identity of United Nations whistle-blowers to the very person they accuse of misconduct; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61328/21]

351. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs further to Parliamentary Question No. 71 of 2 December 2021, if his attention has been drawn to the fact that a person requested that the Government send an observer to their court hearings in June 2019, at which the United Nations position is that this policy continues; the basis for refusing that request; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61329/21]

352. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs further to Parliamentary Question No. 71 of 2 December 2021, the actions that were taken by his Department or by the Government after being informed by a person of the intention by management at the United Nations to dismiss them despite being formally recognised as a whistle-blower who was at risk of retaliatory dismissal since July 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61330/21]

353. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs further to Parliamentary Question No. 71 of 2 December 2021, if his attention has been drawn to the fact that in 2021 alone the Government donated almost €3 million to UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in voluntary contributions on top of its assessed contributions; the amount that is not earmarked; the measures his Department takes to ensure none of the funding is used for the purpose of retaliatory investigations against whistle-blowers or for defending this policy before United Nations tribunals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61331/21]

354. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs further to Parliamentary Question No. 71 of 2 December 2021, if he will request an independent, external investigation of this policy and of the retaliation against the whistle-blower who reported same; if will meet with the person as they have requested; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61332/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 346 to 354, inclusive, together.

My Department is aware of the issues raised by the individual concerned. The former Ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva met with the individual concerned on 2nd March 2016. The current Ambassador met with the individual concerned on 29 July 2019 and again on 16 September 2021. In the intervening periods the Department has also communicated with the individual concerned by email and telephone.

Ireland has raised the issue of the release of the names of NGO delegates to UN Member States and received assurances directly from the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) that, while there had been a historical practice whereby the names of participants were occasionally confirmed to States in limited circumstances, this practice has since ceased.

Ireland provides un-earmarked funding to the OHCHR for its core development-related work. €1.865 million of un-earmarked funding was provided each year for 2019 and 2020, rising to €1.965 million in 2021. An additional earmarked grant of €300,000 was provided to the OHCHR this year to specifically support work on civil society space and reprisals against human rights defenders.

This support is part of Ireland's strong advocacy and leadership at the UN and globally on the protection of civil society space and the prevention of reprisals against Human Rights Defenders which engage with Human Rights bodies at the UN. In 2013, Ireland led a new resolution at the Human Rights Council entitled "Civil society space: creating and maintaining, in law and in practice a safe and enabling environment". This resolution addressed the issue of civil society space as a human rights concern for the first time at the Human Rights Council. Ireland continues to lead on the renewal of this resolution, most recently in July 2021. In September 2021, Ireland led a successful resolution at the Human Rights Council condemning acts of intimidation or reprisals against Human Rights Defenders engaging with the United Nations.

In common with other European Union Member States, Ireland has raised our concerns with China regarding the situation in Xinjiang on a number of occasions, both bilaterally and in multilateral fora. Most recently, at the 48th session of the UN Human Rights Council, Ireland joined an EU Group Statement of 26 Member States, which called on China to comply with its obligations under national, and international law to respect and protect human rights, including in Xinjiang. On 21 October, Ireland joined a cross-regional statement on Human Rights in China at the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly, which calls on China to allow immediate, meaningful and unfettered access to Xinjiang for independent observers, including the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

We have also raised our concerns bilaterally with the Chinese authorities at senior official level and I discussed the issue with Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi during our meeting on 30 May. In that discussion, I outlined Ireland and the EU's position on the treatment of Uighurs and other minorities in Xinjiang. I emphasised the importance of allowing unrestricted access to the region to independent observers in order to make an objective assessment of the situation, particularly through the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Question No. 347 answered with Question No. 346.

Question No. 348 answered with Question No. 346.

Question No. 349 answered with Question No. 346.

Question No. 350 answered with Question No. 346.

Question No. 351 answered with Question No. 346.

Question No. 352 answered with Question No. 346.

Question No. 353 answered with Question No. 346.

Question No. 354 answered with Question No. 346.

Covid-19 Pandemic

355. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the supports his Department will provide for Irish tourists that may have either a positive antigen or PCR test for Covid-19 within a 72 or 48 hour timeframe of their scheduled return to Ireland and will not be able to travel home in such circumstances. [61513/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department provides consular assistance to all Irish citizens in distress overseas where requested. This includes confidential advice and support in relation to illness or any emergency situation, in line with the principles of our Consular Assistance Charter.

Irish citizens who test positive for Covid-19 while travelling abroad are advised to follow the local public health guidance in their destination until the required period of quarantine has ended. Any citizen who tests positive would not be in a position to return to Ireland during this period as this would be in breach of regulations and would contravene public health guidance.

Citizens who test positive for Covid-19 while travelling abroad who have not been issued with a recovery certificate may travel to Ireland with a positive RT-PCR result. The result must be more than 10 days and less than 180 days old when travelling to Ireland. Since 5 December, citizens in this position are also required to show a negative antigen test result from a test taken within 48 hours prior to arrival. Citizens who test positive for Covid-19 while travelling abroad and who have been issued with a recovery certificate may travel to Ireland with this certificate and the relevant negative antigen test result.

Public health advice is that a person showing a residual positive with a PCR test is unlikely to test positive with an antigen test if they have recovered from COVID-19.

Concerned citizens in this situation should contact the nearest Embassy or Consulate for advice and consular assistance. While our Embassies and Consulates cannot provide medical advice, consular officials can provide citizens with information on local health supports in the context of COVID-19, including details of English-speaking doctors where required.

Requirements for individuals travelling to Ireland in the context of COVID-19, including the requirement for those arriving to Ireland to have a negative/not-detected COVID-19 test result, are a matter for the Department of Health. My Department continues to work closely with the Department of Health to ensure that appropriate advice and support is provided to Irish citizens overseas.

Passport Services

356. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when the passport office will return to normal processing times following the decision not to deem the passport office as an essential service and to suspend the production of passports during the lockdown (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61573/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Passport Service operations have been severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, as were many Government services. The Passport Service maintained operations throughout the pandemic, notwithstanding the fact that the processing of passports requires physical attendance on site to deliver this service. Passport Service staff assisted citizens who required passports for a range of emergency and urgent personal, business or legal reasons, or who had compelling humanitarian needs to travel. As a result of well-implemented safety protocols, 67,000 passports were issued between January and May of this year.

In the context of the Government's "COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021", I recognised that scaling up of our services was necessary and so categorised the Passport Service as an essential service within that framework. I advised Government of my decision on 29 April 2021. Passport Service operations began scaling up on 4 May 2021.

The Passport Service has issued almost 600,000 passports to date in 2021 and 45% of simple adult renewals issue within one business day.

I am aware that many applicants wish to have their passport application processed in time for travel over the Christmas season. I wish to assure the Deputy that the Passport Service is attaching particular priority to processing passport applications that are fully in order and complete and have an expected issue date before the Christmas holidays.

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. Passport Service figures show that a high proportion of applications are incomplete and the onus is on the applicant to submit the required documents to the Service. 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 currently experiencing a high demand for first time passports. 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.

My Department has been actively working with the Public Appointments Service to recruit additional permanent and temporary staff. This recruitment drive is well underway and will

double the number of staff in the Passport Service from June 2021 levels to a total of 920 staff by the end of January. I am confident that the additional staff currently being assigned to the Passport Service will help to reduce turnaround times and to respond to the current and anticipated high 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.

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.

Human Rights

357. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on the current political situation in Myanmar and in particular the jailing of a person (details supplied) for incitement and breaching Covid-19 rules; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61745/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): President Win Myint, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and Mayor Myo Aung received sentences in a military court in Myanmar on 6 December. Ireland condemns the politically motivated verdicts and believe they represent another step towards the dismantling of the rule of law and a further violation of human rights in Myanmar.

The proceedings appear to be an attempt to exclude democratically elected leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi, from future political engagement and the inclusive dialogue process called for by ASEAN's Five Point Consensus. The military's actions show contempt for the will of the people, expressed clearly in the November 2020 elections. Ireland joined statements issued by both the European Union and United Nations Security Council expressing concern at the sentencing and reiterating their calls for the release of those who have been arbitrarily detained since 1 February 2021.

The coup in Myanmar is a reversal of the progress made towards democracy and rule of law in Myanmar that has taken years to establish. I am gravely concerned by the escalation in violence and displacement in the country and the humanitarian and human rights situation.

Ireland is actively engaging at the European Union and United Nations 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.

Ireland, along with our European Union colleagues, has been a steadfast supporter of Myanmar's civilian and democratic transition, its peace process and national reconciliation, and its inclusive socio-economic development. We are currently working with the European Union to consider further actions to restore the democratic path in Myanmar. Through the UN and our Embassy network, we are encouraging those who have influence on the military leadership, including ASEAN and countries within the region, to use it to find a political resolution to this

crisis and protect the human rights of the Myanmar people.

The situation remains on the agenda of the United Nations Security Council and we will continue to work with partners in search of a resolution to the deepening crisis.

Covid-19 Pandemic

358. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position in relation to Irish citizens in Australia who are currently on bridging visas while they wait for issue of a temporary visa otherwise referred to as a Covid visa particularly as applicants are unable to travel home to Ireland during this period which can take up to 18 months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61747/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): As the Deputy will be aware, the Australian authorities have taken exceptional measures to restrict international travel in response to the pandemic. Entry into Australia and the issue of visas are matters solely for the Australian authorities. However, I am very conscious of the impact which these travel restrictions are having on many Irish people both here and in Australia, especially those who have not seen family and friends for a very long time, and often in very difficult situations. This was something that I raised with my Australian counterpart, Foreign Minister Marise Payne, when we met virtually in June.

A Bridging Visa is a temporary Australian visa granted in certain circumstances, for example, while a substantive visa application is being considered. Bridging visas were issued to the holders of temporary Australian visas when those visas expired during the pandemic. This enabled the holders, including many Irish citizens, to remain in Australia and to work there. In general, however, these bridging visas do not give the holder a right to return to Australia if they leave. I fully appreciate that this has left many Irish citizens in Australia in a very difficult position during the pandemic. Full information on bridging visa applications is available on the Australian Department of Home Affairs website at www.homeaffairs.gov.au/.

I welcome the recent indications by the Australian authorities that they plan to ease international travel restrictions on a phased basis. It is anticipated that fully vaccinated holders of qualifying visas will be permitted to depart and return to Australia from this week onwards and without needing to apply for a special travel exemption. However, the list of qualifying visas does not include bridging visas, even if the holder has applied for one of the qualifying visas. My Department is endeavouring to mitigate the impact of Australia's international travel restrictions on our many Irish citizens in Australia. Our Embassy Canberra and Consulate General Sydney will continue to closely monitor developments and will liaise with the Australian authorities on the easing of travel restrictions, particularly as they affect the Irish holders of Australian bridging visas. Throughout this pandemic, often in difficult circumstances, the Embassy, the Consulate and the Irish Support agencies in Australia have provided consular support to our affected citizens and they will continue to do so as Australia begins to open up to international travel.

Brexit Issues

359. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his attention has been drawn to a new requirement for EU citizens living in Ireland to fill in an Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) if they are travelling to Northern Ireland; if he has spoken to UK officials regarding this decision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61756/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am aware of the UK's Nationality and Borders Bill, which was recently passed in the House of Commons and has now proceeded to the House of Lords.

As currently drafted, this Bill would provide that the UK's immigration rules may require that specified categories of individual, to be set down in the rules, have an Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) in order to travel to the UK. This may include 'local journeys' to the UK from within the Common Travel Area (CTA). It is important to note that, while the Bill provides that such a requirement may be introduced, any such requirement would be introduced by way of future amendments to the UK's immigration rules. It is also important to note that the Bill provides that the proposed ETA system will not apply to Irish and British citizens and the UK Government has made clear that there will continue to be no immigration checks on the land border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. The UK Government has spoken about the requirement coming into effect by 2024, though this timeframe could change.

Officials in my Department are seeking clarification with the UK Government as to how it is proposed to apply the requirement in Northern Ireland and what changes are intended to be introduced in future immigration rules. As the Deputy is aware, tens of thousands of people, including many non-Irish EU/EEA nationals living in Ireland, cross the land border every day – visiting friends and family, going to work, socialising. There are also considerations in terms of supply chains and for tourism on an all-island basis, should this proposed legislation impact on any cross-border movements for non-Irish EU/EEA nationals.

For our part, the Government has made its position clear that there should be no hard border on the island of Ireland. This legislation remains under consideration within the UK Parliament and we will continue to engage with the UK Government to ensure that our position is clearly heard as this legislation progresses.

Question No. 360 answered with Question No. 339.

Human Rights

361. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the Government intends to participate in the diplomatic boycott of the upcoming Winter Olympics in China, in view of the credible evidence presented by international human rights groups that the actions of the Chinese Government against Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang amount to crimes against humanity (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61862/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland, along with our EU partners, remains deeply concerned about the treatment of Uighurs and other ethnic minorities in the province of Xinjiang. We are closely following the situation, including in relation to evidence based reports of systemic abuse, torture, arbitrary detention, forced labour, forced sterilisations, and restrictions on freedom of religion and belief.

I raised our concerns regarding this situation with Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi during my trip to China in May. In that discussion, I outlined Ireland and the EU's position on the treatment of Uighurs and other minorities in Xinjiang. I emphasised the importance of allowing unrestricted access to the region to independent observers in order to make an objective assessment of the situation, particularly through the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Ireland has also been actively engaged on this matter in the multilateral contexts. At the 48th UN Human Rights Council in September this year, Ireland joined an EU Group Statement

of 26 Member States, which called on China to comply with its obligations under national and international law to respect and protect human rights, particularly in Xinjiang. In October, Ireland joined a cross-regional statement on the situation in Xinjiang, delivered at the UN General Assembly. The statement called on China to allow "immediate, meaningful and unfettered access to Xinjiang for independent observers, including the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights".

In response to the situation in Xinjiang, and under the EU global human rights sanctions regime, the EU unanimously adopted sanctions on 22 March 2021 against one entity and four individuals in China. The EU global human rights sanctions regime allows the EU to target serious human rights violations and abuses by state and non-state actors worldwide. It enables the EU to stand up quickly and in a more tangible and direct way for human rights, one of the fundamental values of the EU and its foreign policy.

In relation to the 2022 Winter Olympics, it has not been customary for Minsters or Minsters of State to attend the Winter Olympics in the past. No Government Ministers are scheduled to travel to Beijing for the Winter Olympics as was also the case at the Tokyo Olympics, given COVID19 concerns. The Department of Foreign Affairs, through the Embassy of Ireland in Beijing, will provide appropriate consular assistance to the athletes and their teams for the duration of the Games, particularly in light of the very complex public health requirements to be implemented at the Games.

The protection and promotion of human rights is a core pillar of Ireland's foreign policy, and Ireland will continue to monitor and assess the situation and, along with our EU partners, engage with Chinese authorities bilaterally and in appropriate multilateral fora to address our concerns.

United Nations

362. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the assessment the Government has made of a recent independent report (details supplied) which revealed that the number of states in which the recruitment of children by armies and armed groups occurs is at its highest level globally in three decades; if the Government intends to raise this issue at the United Nations Security Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61863/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The recruitment of children remains a significant and deeply worrying issue with thousands of children recruited into conflicts around the world each year.

This timely report from Save the Children reinforces the findings of the UN Secretary-General's annual report on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) which examines both trends and specific country situations, listing all armed groups that recruit and use children.

In the latest report covering 2020, the Secretary-General identified twenty one countries, in addition to the Lake Chad basin, where more than 26,000 grave violations against children were verified. The report highlights the recruitment and use of 8,521 children, the killing of 2,674 children, and the maiming of 5,748 children, as well as the gendered nature of the problem - 85 per cent of those recruited were boys, while 98% of sexual violence was perpetrated against girls.

5 of the countries in the UN report feature on the agenda of the Security Council and Ireland's membership of the Council offers us an opportunity to play an active role.

At this year's annual debate on Children and Armed Conflict in June, President Higgins delivered Ireland's national statement, focusing on education, protection and accountability.

In the last month, Ireland delivered statements at two Arria formula meetings, the first on the issue of children without parental care in conflict, and the second focusing on the protection of education during conflict.

Ireland also strongly supported the recently adopted UNSC Resolution 2601 concerning the Protection of Education in Conflict and is also a signatory of the Safe Schools Declaration which outlines a set of commitments to protect education from attack.

Finally, Ireland continues to combat the use of child soldiers through our development programme, Irish Aid, which has a strong focus on access to education, particularly for girls, as well as on developing skills and livelihood opportunities.

Humanitarian Access

363. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the humanitarian assistance the Government is providing to the people of Somalia at present to address the severe food and water shortages facing 2.3 million residents there as recently reported by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61864/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): The humanitarian situation in Somalia is worsening, exacerbated by a three year long drought which has affected more than 2.8 million people in 66 out of the 74 districts in Somalia. An estimated 133,000 people, mostly in central and southern areas have been displaced. There are fears that the situation could continue to worsen into 2022. The Somalia government declared a state of emergency on 23 November and appealed for humanitarian assistance.

Ireland has strong track record of support for the people of Somalia, with the Irish Aid programme contributing over €57 million in humanitarian assistance to the country since 2012. So far this year Irish Aid funding of €5,756,888 has been allocated to humanitarian action in Somalia, including direct humanitarian funding to Irish NGOs active on the ground responding to the impacts of the drought. Ireland also contributed €3,500,000 to the Country Based Pooled Fund for Somalia, including this month a specific contribution of €500,000 in response to the drought.

The UN OCHA Central Emergency Response Fund, of which Ireland is one of the top ten donors globally, has provided US$8 million to drought response, augmented by $6 million from the Somalia Humanitarian Fund. These pooled funding instruments provide rapid and flexible funding where it is needed most. They enable timely, effective and principled humanitarian action while strengthening leadership, coordination and coherence in emergency response. In 2021, Ireland made an overall contribution of €11,500,000 to the Central Emergency Response Fund.

Foreign Policy

364. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the actions his Department will take to support the humanitarian effort in Yemen. [61866/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The situation in Yemen continues

to be the world's most severe humanitarian crisis. Seven years of conflict, accompanied by economic collapse and the breakdown of public institutions and services, have 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 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 constructively towards a sustainable peace.

Ireland also welcomes the Yemen Economic Framework proposed by the UN, and we will continue to encourage all parties to constructively engage with these proposals in response to catastrophic food insecurity and poverty in Yemen.

In 2021, in addition to the €5 million pledged earlier this year as Ireland's contribution to humanitarian situation in Yemen and recognising the scale of the challenge, this month Ireland contributed an additional €1 million to the humanitarian response. This latest contribution brings Irish Aid humanitarian funding to Yemen since the crisis began to over €34 million. Given the scale of the ongoing crisis, Ireland will continue to provide funding to help meet the needs of the people of Yemen in 2022.

Foreign Policy

365. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has spoken with his Polish counterpart to discuss the current situation at the Polish-Belarussian border. [61872/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland stands in solidarity with Poland and other affected Member States amid this deeply challenging situation at the Polish-Belarusian border. We are mindful that frontline EU Member States like Poland face immense pressures and we recognise that the unprecedented state of affairs at the Polish-Belarusian border has been a major factor in Poland's state of emergency decision.

Nevertheless, we are very concerned for those migrants at the border and we would appeal to Poland to consider admitting international humanitarian organisations into the relevant area to assist with meeting migrants' urgent and basic needs. Independent media access should also be facilitated. Furthermore, we would ask that Poland consider the possibility of accepting help and input from EU sources like Frontex. While the instrumentalisation of migrants by President Lukashenko's regime is to be condemned and the EU's territorial integrity needs to be maintained, EU values must be respected and Europe's humanitarian obligations under the Geneva Conventions upheld.

At the November Foreign Affairs Council, I joined in discussions on this issue with my fellow Foreign Ministers where we gave political approval to the fifth package of sanctions, co-sponsored by Ireland.

On a visit to Poland in December, my colleague, Minister of State for European Affairs, Thomas Byrne, TD, met with Poland's Deputy Foreign Minister, Marcin Przydacz, Undersecretary of State for Security, the Americas, Asia and Eastern Policy. Their discussions included developments at the Poland-Belarus border as well as migration and Minister Byrne expressed Ireland's position to Minister Prydacz. Furthermore, on a visit to Lithuania in October, Minister

Byrne visited the Lithuanian-Belarusian border and saw first-hand the challenging situation in the region.

This dialogue and experience will inform Ireland's engagement at EU level with all our fellow Member States, including Poland, to ensure Europe is equipped to deal with its migration challenges in a comprehensive and effective but also humane manner.

Passport Services

366. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has plans to reduce the timeframe for documents to be uploaded by the passport service to applications considering that the delays between documents being submitted and uploaded can extend application processing times significantly; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61964/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Passport Office continually examines how to improve its processes and turnaround times, including examining the process for the submission and verification of supporting documentation. 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 early 2022.

My Department has been actively working with the Public Appointments Service to recruit permanent and temporary staff between now and the end of January 2022. This recruitment drive is well underway and will double the number of staff in the Passport Service from June 2021 levels to a total of 920 staff by the end of January.

These staff members are currently being trained and assigned across all areas of the Passport Service, including to the teams who handle the registration, verification and scanning of the supporting documents required to complete a passport application. This can be a time-consuming process depending on the complexity of the application and the origin of the supporting documents. The rigorous verification of supporting documents is a critical measure to protect the integrity of the Irish passport.

I am confident that the additional staff currently being assigned to the Passport Service will help to reduce turnaround times and to respond to the current and anticipated high demand for passports in 2022.

United Nations

367. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his Department has engaged with bodies regarding the development of a United Nations binding treaty on business and human rights; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61974/21]

368. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he plans to bring forward gender responsive human rights and environmental due diligence legislation to ensure businesses respect human rights across their activities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61975/21]

369. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a report has been completed on whether the voluntary guidelines in Ireland's National Plan on Business and Human Rights has had an impact on improving respect for human rights; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61976/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 367 to 369, inclusive, together.

Under Ireland's inaugural National Plan on Business and Human Rights, the multi-stakeholder Implementation Group developed Guidelines on Business and Human Rights for business enterprises. These Guidelines have been published on the Department of Foreign Affairs' website and members of the Implementation Group including Ibec, Chambers Ireland, the Irish Exporters Association, and Business in the Community Ireland, have promoted the Guidelines. Following the launch of the Guidelines, my Department co-hosted practical webinars for businesses, together with partners including the Trinity Centre for Social Innovation and Shift. As the Guidelines were published less than eight months ago, it is premature to fully assess their impact at this time.

It is my understanding that the European Commission is planning to propose a legislative initiative to introduce mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence next year. I consider this a positive development in the context of the implementation of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. However, as the Deputy will be aware, the regulation of businesses is a matter for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

Regarding the potential development of a United Nations legally binding treaty in the area of Business and Human Rights, the European Union holds many of the competences in this policy area. Accordingly, Ireland is engaging in the process through European Union structures in Brussels and Geneva. At the most recent negotiation session in respect of a potential treaty, the EU offered to work with the drafters to address concerns with the current draft text.

Globally, the European Union and its Member States are leaders in implementing the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. The EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024 contains a suite of measures in the area of Business and Human Rights. Ireland strongly supports these initiatives and has shared the lessons learned from the review of our own National Plan at EU level. This review was completed earlier this year and noted by Government at its meeting of 7 December 2021.

Question No. 368 answered with Question No. 367.

Question No. 369 answered with Question No. 367.

Passport Services

370. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if there has been an audit or review carried out or commissioned by his Department into service user interaction with the Passport Office; the analysis that has been undertaken by his Department into the efficacy of communications between the passport service and the public; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61997/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): There has not been a recent review of service user experience undertaken by the Passport Service. Passport Service operations have been severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, as were many Government services. Despite the consequences of the pandemic, the Passport Service has issued almost 600,000 passports to date in 2021 and 45% of simple adult renewals issue within one business day.

A national survey of Irish consumers conducted by a third party during June and July 2021 ranked the Passport Service as the best public sector brand in the customer service category.

The Passport Service continually examines ways to improve its communication and engagement with passport applicants. In recent weeks, all staff working in the Customer Service Hub have received customised training giving them additional resources and tools to provide excellent customer service. 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. In addition, the Passport Service participates in the inter-departmental Quality Customer Service Action Team.

The Passport Service Customer Service Hub has been operational since June 2021 in line with the scaling up of passport operations as pandemic restrictions were eased. Customer Service officers respond 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 155,000 queries from customers.

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. These staff members are currently being trained and assigned across all areas of the Passport Service, including to the customer service team. I am confident that these additional resources will help to improve customer experience and reduce turnaround times.

Covid-19 Pandemic

371. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if Ireland has supported the call for the TRIPS waiver at the World Trade Organisation to be waived to ensure that Covid-19 vaccines and treatments are made more available particularly in developing countries; the steps he has taken to pursue same particularly at European Union and United Nations Security Council level; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62422/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): Universal and equitable access to safe, effective and affordable vaccines, diagnostics and treatments is crucial in the global fight against COVID-19.

My colleague, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, leads on trade and World Trade Organisation matters (WTO), including on the current discussion on the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement.

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

The EU proposed an alternative to the TRIPS waiver that relates to the use of the flexibilities in the TRIPS Agreement. The proposal is targeted and pragmatic and aims at ensuring that governments can resort to compulsory licences, including to export to countries with no or limited manufacturing capacities, in the most effective manner adapted to the circumstances of a pandemic.

The EU is of the view that there is no single solution and that a multi-pronged approach is needed and that discussions should concentrate on how the Intellectual Property system can contribute towards increasing the manufacturing capacity and the equitable access to vaccines

around the world.

Despite the postponement of the 12th WTO Ministerial Conference, WTO members will continue to engage in a solution-oriented manner to find an outcome on how the WTO can contribute to an effective response to any pandemic, not just the current one.

Ireland will engage with the European Commission and other member states on the EU position for the WTO discussions including discussions on how the flexibilities within the TRIPS Agreement can contribute towards increasing the manufacturing capacity and the equitable access to vaccines around the world.

The global production of vaccines is increasing rapidly and it is estimated that 12 billion doses of COVID vaccines will be produced by the end of 2021. The EU considers the COVAX facility as the mechanism best placed to ensure equitable access to the global supply of vaccines for low, middle, and high income countries.

Team Europe has committed to donate 700 million doses of vaccines to low and middle income countries by mid-2022, of which 250 million should be delivered by the end of this year. In addition the EU is investing €1billion to ramp up vaccine production capacity in Africa.

Ireland has contributed €8.5million in funding to COVAX in 2021 and is donating 1.3 million vaccines to low and middle income countries via the COVAX facility. Further donations via the facility are expected.

Defence Forces

372. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Defence if the contract has been signed for the construction of a new cadet school in the Defence Forces training centre, Curragh, County Kildare; and the duration of this project. [61277/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): It is intended that the contract will be signed early in the New Year, with a construction programme of 12 months expected to complete the project.

Naval Service

373. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Defence if the Naval Service made similar requests in relation to compliance with the European Union Common Fisheries Policy to the skippers of fishing vessels of other European Union member states that were fishing in the same area off the south coast of Ireland as an Irish registered fishing vessel (details supplied) when they were requested to return to harbour by the Naval Service on 30 November 2021; and if not, the reason. [61348/21]

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. In terms of fishery protection 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.

In relation to national sea-fishery protection roles, the Sea-Fisheries and Maritime Juris-

diction Act 2006 established the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) as the competent Authority for securing efficient and effective enforcement of sea fisheries protection legislation and the sustainable exploitation of marine fish resources from the waters around Ireland within Ireland's EEZ. A Service Level Agreement is in place which underpins the relationship between the SFPA and the Defence Organisation.

The Naval Service work in close cooperation with the SFPA in relation to a risk based approach to fishery protection to better utilise resources. This is being undertaken with the encouragement and agreement of the SFPA and the European Fisheries Control Agency - EFCA.

In relation to the 30 November 2021, an Irish Registered fishing vessel (FV) was detained by the Irish Naval Service for alleged breaches of Irish and European fisheries legislation. As part of the detention process the FV was instructed to proceed to a designated port, under escort from the ship, where she was subsequently handed over to An Garda Síochána. Other FVs that might have been in the area were not instructed to proceed to a port as they were not detained for alleged breaches of Irish and European fisheries legislation.

No further comment will be made as it would be inappropriate to comment on ongoing cases.

Defence Forces

374. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Defence the mandatory retirement age for serving privates and non-commissioned officers in the Defence Forces; the age that such members become eligible for an Army pension; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61508/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): A person who enlisted in the Permanent Defence Force (PDF) before 1 January 1994 may be permitted to continue in service up to the age of 60 years. The normal maximum periods of service for personnel enlisted to the PDF post 1 January 1994 are:

- Line Privates, Line Corporals (and Naval Service equivalent ranks) and those in receipt of Technical Pay Groups 1 or 2, may not serve beyond 21 years;

- Privates and Corporals (and Naval Service equivalent ranks) in receipt of Technical Pay Group 3 or above may serve up to 50 years of age;

- Sergeants (and Naval Service equivalent rank) may serve up to 50 years of age;

- Higher ranked NCOs may serve up to 56 years of age.

Arising from an adjudication in 2015, it was agreed that a 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 extended to include post 1994 Sergeants, who also can also 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.

As the recommendations in the review require consideration from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, in relation to implications on costs and pensions, the matter is currently the subject of detailed discussions with that Department. Discussions with PDFORRA will take place following the conclusion of the consultation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

As regards the age that such members become eligible for a pension the position is that as with public service employees generally, the specific pension arrangements of members of the PDF depend primarily on when a person first joins the public service.

For enlisted personnel who joined prior to 1 April 2004, pension is payable immediately following retirement and regardless of age. The minimum service required to qualify for a pension is 21 years, or 12 if discharged on medical grounds. Maximum benefits are payable after 31 years' service.

For enlisted personnel who joined the PDF between 1 April 2004 and 31 December 2012 the minimum pension age is 50. Otherwise, where retirement is before age 50, pension benefits are preserved, i.e. payable from age 60. A minimum service of 2 years is required for pension (whether immediate or preserved) and maximum benefits are payable after 30 years' service.

A person who enlisted from 1 January 2013 onwards is a member of the Single Public Service Pension Scheme and benefits are payable immediately on retirement from the PDF after age 50, and subject to having a minimum of 2 years' pensionable service.

Immediate pension benefits may also be paid in a limited number of specific situations such as in the case of ill-health retirement and death.

Defence Forces

375. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Defence the proposed arrangements for carrying out a review of wages and salaries of enlisted members of the Defence Forces; if an organisation (details supplied) will be consulted in relation to these arrangements before they are finalised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61511/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): 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.

The current public service pay agreement, '*Building Momentum – A New Public Service Agreement 2021 – 2022'* provides for 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.

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. The terms of reference for the Commission included an examination of the evolution of all remuneration systems and structures currently in place in the Defence Forces.

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.

The PDF representative associations will be consulted on matters arising from report that come within the scope of representation.

Defence Forces

376. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence the number of members of the Defence Forces of all ranks who have been selected for mandatory overseas duty in each of the past five years; the number of appeals that were made; the number of appeals that were successful; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61584/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Military Authorities advise that it is not possible to collate the required information in the time available. I will revert to the Deputy as soon as the information is made available to me.

Defence Forces

377. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence the progress to date on the report of Commission on the Future of the Defence Forces; the date the report will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61587/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Programme for Government committed to an independent commission to undertake a comprehensive review of the Defence Forces. The independent Commission on the Defence Forces was established by Government in December 2020, with a mandate to report within 12 months. 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 it's terms of reference 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.

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. Members of the Commission conducted site visits to a number military locations across the country, meeting nearly 1,000 military personnel.

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

I understand that the Commission are continuing their work with a view to completing the Report as soon as possible. The Report will be fully considered at that point.

Air Corps

378. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Defence if the Air Corps is contracting senior aircraft inspectors from a company (details supplied) to supervise and sign off on maintenance being performed by Air Corps technicians; the cost of this; the reason it is not being performed by Air Corps personnel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61674/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am advised by the military authorities that the Air Corps operate a maintenance plan which endeavours 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 this regard, the Military Authorities have advised that the Irish Air Corps has a contract with Leonardo Aircraft, the original equipment manufacturers, for service support provided by a number of their aircraft technicians. These personnel provide additional specialist helicopter maintenance services on site in Casement Aerodrome and are directly employed by Leonardo

Aircraft and are not outside agency aircraft maintenance workers employed under a contract for services directly by the Air Corps. In addition, they are not senior aircraft inspectors and the work undertaken by them is carried out under the supervision of senior Air Corps Technicians and Aeronautical Engineering Officers. The invoiced cost to date in 2021 for this original equipment manufacturer service support is €172,000.

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

379. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Education the supports that have been granted to schools (details supplied) in relation to measures seeking to prevent the spread of Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61127/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Department of Education has always been guided by public health advice in relation to appropriate Covid-19 infection prevention and control measures in place in schools. These measures protect students, their parents and school staff and are very effective.

Public Health continue to advise that the two most important actions to prevent the introduction and spread of Covid-19 (and other respiratory viruses), is by ensuring no-one with new onset symptoms attend school, and that all recommended infection prevention and control measures are in place in line with school Covid response plans.

Each school was provided with an updated COVID-19 Response Plan in advance of the return to school. Significant additional resources of €639m were put into schools in the last academic year to keep schools safe.

Further funding of €57.6 million has been paid by way of Covid-19 capitation to schools in September for the implementation of infection prevention and control measures for this term. This funding will cater for school costs related to hand hygiene measures, PPE requirements, enhanced cleaning supports and supervision.

At primary level, additional management resources for principal release days were provided for Principals and Deputy Principals. Teacher Supply panels were also expanded to cover the majority of primary schools nationwide, and a recent review saw an additional 200 teaching posts added resulting in approximately 680 teaching posts on these panels available to provide substitute cover in schools.

The schools referred to by the Deputy have received €142,411 capitation related funding for 2020/21 school year. To date both schools have also received additional financial supports of €71,927 to provide for Cleaning, PPE and hand hygiene costs under the COVID-19 response plans.

My Department has committed to ensuring that the full range of measures necessary to allow schools operate safely in the Covid-19 environment will continue to be available for the 2021/22 school year.

School Staff

380. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which adequate staff and relief staff remains available in schools throughout County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61152/21]

381. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education if a means has been found to address the issue of shortages of relief staff within schools throughout the country; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61153/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 380 and 381 together.

A range of measures are in place to provide enhanced substitute cover in the context of current challenges.

The higher education institutions (HEIs) have ensured flexibility to programme delivery to enhance the availability of professional master of education (PME) students to undertake substitute work. PME student teachers have been advised to register with the Teaching Council and to register with Sub Seeker, the national substitution portal service to make their availability known to schools.

In addition, the HEIs providing undergraduate programmes of initial teacher education have agreed to facilitate the release of 3rd and year 4th year students to support schools up to the end of the current term. They have also agreed to explore flexible options in relation to the assessment requirement for programmes in the context of students being available to support schools.

The education stakeholders, including the Department, the HEIs and the Teaching Council, will continue to work together to address any practical issues and ensure the ongoing availability of student teachers to support schools pre and post-Christmas.

A further 200 posts have been allocated to the primary substitute teacher supply panels in existing/new areas where significant challenges in sourcing substitution has continued, bringing the total to 680 posts covering approximately 2,600 schools. There are 7 primary substitute teacher supply panels in operation in County Kildare, covering 104 schools. A further 13 positions have been recently sanctioned, increasing the allocation in the county to 33 supply panel teachers.

In order to assist with the recruitment of teachers to supply panels, and in the context of the Covid-19 emergency, the Teaching Council has confirmed that newly qualified teachers (NQTs) who secure posts on supply panels in the 2021/2022 academic year may complete Droichead, the induction framework for NQTs. This is an exceptional time bound measure. Further guidance will be provided by the National Induction Programme for Teachers regarding the role of the base school and partner schools in the process.

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, qualified teachers on secondment to the Department's teacher education support services have been asked to make themselves available to provide substitute cover in schools. Arrangements have been made for available teachers from these services to register with Sub Seeker.

Continuing professional development (CPD) where substitution is required has been sus-

pended until after the February 2022 mid-term, with the exception of planned CPD relating to reforms in senior cycle examinable subjects. This measure is being taken on an exceptional basis.

Retired teachers returning to classrooms until the end of the current school term will not have their pension abated.

In exceptional circumstances where there is no substitute available it may be possible for the Treoraí (formerly co-operating teachers) who host student teachers on school placement to provide substitute cover for absences of a very short duration in their own school if another substitute cannot be sourced at short notice. This should be for the shortest time possible until a substitute can be recruited.

At post primary level a new temporary arrangement has been put in place to provide principals with an alternative means of sourcing appropriate substitution cover, preferably with subject appropriate qualifications, where none is otherwise available. This scheme will assist post-primary schools to ensure that they can source sufficient substitution cover, in circumstances where schools cannot source cover through the existing arrangements. Post-primary teachers will now be able to work over 22 hours per week, working extra hours to provide substitute cover, up to a total of 35 additional hours between 29th November and 28th February, 2022.

These recently announced measures are in addition to those already in place, including, for the current school year, changes 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 has undertaken a communications campaign with the over 111,000 teachers on its register to raise awareness to the current teacher substitute challenges and to ask registered teachers who are available to do so to register with Sub Seeker, so that their availability to sub is known to schools seeking substitute teachers.

Primary schools with teaching principals have also been asked to cluster their allocation of principal release days to form a full-time fixed-term post to minimise the requirement for substitute teachers.

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

Budget 2022 announced details of funding for an additional 1,165 SNAs (in 2022) to provide support to children with special educational needs, which will bring the total number of SNAs to 19,169 at the end of December 2022. This represents an increase of 81% in the number of SNAs provided since 2011 at which point 10,575 SNAs were available.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide. It has well established structures in place for engaging with schools and parents. NCSE seeks to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all children who have been identified as needing special education placements.

The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme is designed to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs. Such support is provided in order to facilitate the attendance of those pupils at school and also to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils

concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills.

SNAs are not allocated to individual children but to schools as a school based resource. The deployment of SNAs within schools is a matter for the individual Principal/Board of Management of the school. SNAs should be deployed by the school in a manner which best meets the care support requirements of the children enrolled in the school for whom SNA support has been allocated.

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

The allocation of 1,165 SNAs announced in Budget 2022 is to meet the care needs of pupils in 2022 and will enable the establishment of new special classes, creation of new places in special schools, support children in mainstream classes for the 2022/23 school year.

My Department provides funding to recognised primary and post-primary schools in the Free Education Scheme to enable them cater for ancillary services. However, the Boards of Management of these schools are responsible for the employment of ancillary staff and ensuring relief staff are put in place as needed. My Department also provides each Education and Training Board (ETB) with an administration and maintenance staffing allocation to support ETB schools, colleges, head office and other centres of education. It is the responsibility of each ETB to recruit and manage staffing levels within this allocation including ensuring relief staff are put in place as needed.

My Department has sought to support ancillary staff during the Covid-19 period through certain actions. For example special working arrangements were put in place and the Employee Assistance Service was extended to ancillary staff.

Question No. 381 answered with Question No. 380.

Covid-19 Pandemic

382. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if she will provide a list of the schools that have and do not have HEPA filters. [61165/21]

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

The Expert Group in its report notes "very good advice is contained in the Department of Education's Practical Steps for the Deployment of Good Ventilation Practices in Schools" And that "It must be emphasized that ventilation should be delivered as part of a layered strategy of protective measures to control the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19."

The over-arching approach in the guidance is for schools to have windows open as fully as possible when classrooms are not in use and partially open when classrooms are in use. The Expert Group also note "consider using a portable carbon dioxide (CO2) monitor to identify areas of the school with inadequate ventilation. The Departments guidance outlines CO2 monitors

can play a part in providing a useful general indication that areas/rooms may not be adequately ventilated. They can enable occupants to become familiar with the impacts of activities, outdoor weather and window openings on levels of good ventilation. The provision of portable CO2 monitors provides schools with the flexibility to focus their use to those rooms where most beneficial to inform strategies for optimising ventilation in the school. In excess of 35,400 monitors were delivered to schools nationwide at a cost of circa €4 million.

A dedicated team has been established in the Department to support schools that may have concerns about ventilation. Officers are also available to contact schools where required, walking through the steps the schools should take to deploy good ventilation practices etc. Where it is not possible for a school to access the expertise of an engineer or architect, and where necessary, a technical assessment to assist the school can be facilitated through the Department.

Schools that identify inadequate ventilation in a room can utilise their minor work grant (for minor improvements) or apply for emergency works grant assistance to address ventilation enhancements on a permanent basis.

There is no one solution that fits all scenarios, each application requires bespoke analysis and selection of the appropriate unit(s) matched to the specific room size and volume. If, following consultation with a supplier a school feels that its individual space may require specific technical specialist advice then the assistance of a Chartered Engineer or Registered Architect can be sought.

The requirement for air cleaners in schools will depend on advices provided to schools by their Architect/Engineer. As part of contingency planning, the Department has put arrangements in place for a small reserve of air cleaners to facilitate quick deployment to any primary or post-primary school which has an immediate need and has been unsuccessful in sourcing locally. To date there has been no requirement to draw from the Department of Education's reserve.

The Departments approach on good ventilation in schools, as part of a layered strategy of protective measures to control the spread of the virus, is fully consistent with Public Health advice and the Expert Group recommendations on good practices, the use of portable CO2 monitors and the targeted deployment of HEPA air filter devices where necessary for poorly ventilated areas.

School Accommodation

383. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education further to Parliamentary Question No. 377 of 23 November 2021, the options her Department has considered; if her Department has liaised with the school's patron; if not, when this will be done; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61191/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department is currently exploring the options available to address the accommodation needs of the school in question for the 2022/2023 academic year. My Department will engage with the school's patron when a suitable option has been determined.

Education Policy

384. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if clarity will be provided in relation to the position of children with dyslexia (details supplied). [61223/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): The Deputy will be aware that in May 2021 I requested my Department to arrange for a review of the policy on reading classes and schools.

The review will be informed by the Department's Inspectorate's research and development work which facilitates thematic review of provision and practice in schools. The work will involve visits to a number of education settings for children with specific learning disabilities and the gathering of evidence in line with the normal Inspectorate inspection model.

It is expected that the Inspectorate's work will be completed during the period October to December 2021, with composite findings becoming available thereafter which will be published.

These findings, together with any relevant recommendations emerging from the NCSE Policy Advice on Special Classes and Special Schools currently in development, will be considered at that stage to determine the actions required to finalise the review.

The outcome of this work will inform future Department policy on supporting children with special educational needs particularly in relation to reading and literacy.

It is important to note at this stage that my Department has not received any recommendations regarding the closure of any special school.

School Enrolments

385. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education if she will work with a school (details supplied) to ensure it can expand its intake of students for 2022-2023 given that there is a significant number of children whose principle private residence is in the local catchment area and who are attending the local schools have not received a place in the school. [61232/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department is aware of increasing local pressures and demand for additional post-primary school places in a number of school planning areas, including the Malahide school planning area.

However, it is important to note that where enrolment pressures arise, it may not be as a result of lack of accommodation but may be driven by the following factors:

- Duplication of applications – pupils have applied for a place to a number of schools in the area

- School of choice – pupils can't get a place in their preferred school while there are places in other schools in the town/area

- Some towns/areas have single sex schools and while places are available in the school they are not available to all pupils

- External draw – pupils coming from outside the local area

My Department is working to establish the true extent of any capacity issues through ongoing discussions with the relevant school authorities. Similar to the process adopted in advance of the current academic year, my Department is engaging with patron bodies, including patrons in the Malahide school planning area, to identify particular capacity requirements for the forthcoming year(s) which may necessitate further action to that already in train.

Malahide & Portmarnock ETSS opened in September 2018 in response to emerging demographic demand in the area. While the school is currently housed in interim accommodation on its permanent site, the Deputy will be aware that a major building project to construct a permanent school building for Malahide Portmarnock ETSS is included in the Department's school building programme.

The first phase of the new school building is due to be completed in 2022 and it is intended that it will be ready for occupation for the 2022/2023 academic year. The Department understands that the school will have a first year admission intake of 96 pupils for September 2022 and sufficient accommodation will be available for this intake.

Schools Building Projects

386. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education the status of the planning of a new building for a school in (details supplied). [61236/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): A building project for the school in question is included in the Department's ADAPT 3 Programme and a tender competition to appoint a Project Manager for this Programme is currently underway. It is expected that this process will be concluded early in the New Year. The Project Manager, when appointed, will be responsible for initiating the process for the appointment of a Design Team for the ADAPT 3 Programme.

The Department is committed to the delivery of this project, comprising a new 8 classroom school with a 2 class Special Education Needs (SEN) base.

The Department will continue to liaise with the school authorities in respect of further developments during this process.

Weather Events

387. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Education the person or body that made the decision to close schools in County Meath due to a Met Éireann orange warning; the number of orange warnings that have been issued by Met Éireann in each of the past five years; and the number of times in the past the Minister for Education has closed schools on orange warnings. [61243/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The decision to close schools in counties that were under Met Éireann Orange Alert was made by the Department of Education, following consultation with the National Emergency Co-Ordination Group and informed by the expert advice from Met Éireann of a strong possibility that the status of parts of counties under status Orange Alert were likely to change and escalate to status Red Alert. This decision was based on the very significant nature of Storm Barra, as forecast by Met Éireann, and the potential for significant damage. The colour coding system for weather was introduced by Met Éireann in 2012. Schools have closed for weather-related reasons on a number of occasions in the past, including for Storm Ophelia.

Schools Building Projects

388. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Education when the appropriate level of capital funding will be provided to facilitate the building of a new school (details sup-

plied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61252/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The major building project for the school referred to by the Deputy is currently at an advanced stage of architectural planning Stage 2b – Detailed Design, which includes the application for all statutory consents, including Planning Permission, Disability Access Certification and Fire Safety Certification and also the preparation of tender documentation.

The Planning Permission Application was submitted to the Local Authority on June 1st 2021 and a Request for Further Information from the Local Authority is currently being addressed by the Design Team.

The Disability Access Certificate has been granted. The Fire Safety Certificate application was lodged with the Fire Officer in August 2021 and an extensive additional information request was received in September 2021. The Design Teams response to the Fire Officer was recently submitted, and their response is pending.

Until the final grant of statutory applications has been received from the local authority, it is not possible to give a definitive timeline with regard to the completion of Stage 2(b) and the further progression of the project to tender and construction stage.

This major building project is included in my Department's Construction Programme which is being delivered under the National Development Plan.

School Accommodation

389. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Education the amount spent on projects carried out under the emergency works scheme in 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [61279/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I would like to inform the Deputy that the information she requested is set out in the table below.

Year	Spend
2020	€34,832,099.00
2021 (to date)	€44,060,835.00

Road Safety

390. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the case of a school (details supplied); if she will make arrangements to support Cork County Council with funding to address the safety issues identified; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61294/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The new permanent building for the school referred to by the Deputy was included in a bundle of projects which were tendered to a newly established Design and Build Contractors Framework. The tenders are currently being assessed by my Department's Project Manager.

The award of the building contract to the successful Contractor is anticipated in Quarter 1 of 2022. Once a Contractor has been appointed, my Department will keep the school informed of the construction programme underpinning the contract.

The matter of road safety measures at the school's temporary site, the road network outside the school including traffic calming measures and pedestrian facilities are the responsibility of the relevant Local Authority. Local Authorities have the power to decide on road safety measures outside schools to ensure that measures are in place to protect the safety of local school children.

Teacher Training

391. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Education if the Gaeltacht component of primary teacher training will go ahead as normal in January 2022 under current guidelines; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61316/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Under the Teaching Council Standards for initial teacher education (ITE) at primary, all student teachers must complete a 4 week Gaeltacht learning period (2x 2 weeks) as part of their programme. This is compulsory in order to graduate.

The Department is aware that there are students who are due to go on their Gaeltacht learning period in January 2022. Discussions have been taking place between the relevant Higher Education Institution, the Department of Education and the Teaching Council on how best to progress this, in the current circumstances, and all parties are striving to bring the matter to a conclusion as soon as possible.

Covid-19 Pandemic

392. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education if she will have regard to correspondence from a person (details supplied). [61334/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The most up to date guidance in respect of the higher risk categories, for the education sector staff was published by the HSE in July 2021. As with all other guidelines around public health measures, my Department has been led by expert medical advice provided by the Government through the HSE and other relevant public bodies.

My Department's Circular Letter 0042/2021 details the current working arrangements and leave arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic for teachers and special needs assistants employed in recognised primary and post primary schools. This Circular should be read in conjunction with Information Note TC 0027/2021 which was published on 6th December 2021.

The HSE advice on the 'very high risk' group is at link: www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/people-at-higher-risk.html. Having considered the most up to date HSE advice, if an SNA considers they are at very high risk of serious illness from contracting COVID-19, they may apply to the Occupational Health Service (Medmark) for a COVID-19 health risk assessment to be carried out. Having considered the medical information provided with the OHS Risk Assessment Questionnaire, the OHS will provide the SNA with a 'COVID-19 Health Risk Categorisation Report' which advises whether they are at a very high risk of serious illness from contracting COVID-19. The COVID-19 health risk categorisation assessments are performed by a team of qualified and experienced specialists in occupational medicine. Available medical evidence, including reports from treating consultants as well as vaccination status of SNAs, are considered during the OHS COVID-19 health risk categorisation assessment process.

Based on the details provided by the Deputy, Medmark carried out a COVID-19 health risk assessment on the SNA in question and he has been categorised as 'high risk'. The 'high risk' group is defined by the HSE and in accordance with this advice, an SNA in the 'high risk' group who is not ill must attend the workplace and should take extra care to practice social distancing and hand hygiene and the use of personal protective equipment.

An SNA who has been categorised by Medmark and considers that the OHS 'COVID-19 Health Risk Categorisation Report' places them in an incorrect risk category, may request a review. Medmark will re-evaluate the medical evidence provided. The SNA may provide additional medical evidence as part of the review process. In a situation where the review outcome is that the COVID-19 health risk categorisation remains the same, a further review will only be undertaken, where additional medical evidence indicates there has been a change in the SNA's medical status or where there is a change in the HSE guidelines for the 'high risk' group.

My Department has always been guided by public health advice in relation to appropriate COVID-19 infection prevention and control measures in place in schools. These measures protect students, their parents and school staff and are very effective to help prevent and control COVID-19 in schools. My Department will continue to work closely with public health officials and the education stakeholders in respect of the safe operation of schools during COVID-19.

Schools Building Projects

393. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the status of the delivery of a new school building for a school (details supplied). [61336/21]

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

On June 14th 2021, this project was included in a bundle of projects which were tendered to a newly established Design & Build Contractors Framework. The tenders were returned on October 27th 2021 and are currently being assessed by my Department's Project Manager.

The award of the building contract to the successful Contractor is anticipated in Quarter 1 of 2022. Once a Contractor has been appointed, my Department will keep the school informed of the construction programme underpinning the contract.

Road Safety

394. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the unsafe conditions for students walking from Cork city to the temporary site of a school (details supplied); and if she will intervene to ensure these students can walk to school safely. [61337/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The new permanent building for the school referred to by the Deputy was included in a bundle of projects which were tendered to a newly established Design and Build Contractors Framework. The tenders are currently being assessed by my Department's Project Manager.

The award of the building contract to the successful Contractor is anticipated in Quarter 1 of 2022. Once a Contractor has been appointed, my Department will keep the school informed of the construction programme underpinning the contract.

The matter of road safety measures at the school's temporary site, the road network outside the school including traffic calming measures and pedestrian facilities are the responsibility of the relevant Local Authority. Local Authorities have the power to decide on road safety measures outside schools to ensure that measures are in place to protect the safety of local school children.

Schools Building Projects

395. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the status of the proposed replacement for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61357/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Officials from my Department contacted the Deputy's office and received clarification that the school in question is St Mologa's National School, Balbriggan.

The major project for this school is currently at an advanced stage of architectural planning Stage 2b – Detailed Design, which includes the application for all statutory consents, including Planning Permission, Disability Access Certification and Fire Safety Certification and also the preparation of tender documentation.

Upon receipt and review of the Stage 2(b) report, my Department will be in contact with the school and its design team regarding the further progression of this building project.

This major building project is included in my Department's Construction Programme which is being delivered under the National Development Plan.

Site Acquisitions

396. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education if a permanent site has been located for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61358/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Officials in my Department are working closely with officials in Fingal County Council under the Memorandum of Understanding in relation to the acquisition of a suitable permanent location to meet the needs of the school to which you refer.

Negotiations with a landowner are ongoing in relation to a preferred site. While a site acquisition process is underway, given the commercial sensitivities associated with land acquisitions generally, I am not in a position to comment further at this time.

Please rest assured that this project is being given priority attention and we are attempting to bring the matter to a close as soon as possible.

Schools Building Projects

397. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the estimated completion date of the new building for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61359/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The school to which the Deputy refers has completed the tender process and has recently been authorised to issue a Letter of Acceptance to the identified bidder. Subject to no issues arising, it is anticipated that works could commence on site in early Quarter 1 of 2022 with a construction timeframe of approximately 15 months.

Site Acquisitions

398. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the status of the provision of a new site for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61360/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department is not pursuing the acquisition of a site for the school referred to by the Deputy.

The project to provide permanent accommodation for this school is being delivered as part of a campus arrangement with St Joseph's Secondary School on a site located at Kenure, Rush, Co. Dublin.

The project has been devolved for delivery to CEIST, which is the patron body for St. Joseph's Secondary School.

Schools Building Projects

399. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the future plans for the school hub at Mooretown, Swords in which schools (details supplied) are now located; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61361/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The post-primary school referred to by the Deputy is accommodated in the new 1,000 pupil permanent school building at the site in Mooretown. The primary school referred to by the Deputy is currently in interim accommodation at the same location which will be the permanent location for the new primary school building.

The project to provide the permanent building for the primary school is in early architectural planning which involves site surveys, school design stages and the preparation of statutory applications.

Site Acquisitions

400. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Education when her Department will respond to correspondence from Mayo County Council in relation to a school (details supplied); and the steps she has taken since meeting with the same school in Spring 2021. [61368/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Mayo County Council have confirmed in correspondence their willingness to engage further with my Department with regard to the proposed site for the school referred to by the Deputy.

My Department is currently finalising its assessment of the options for the school in question, utilising the most recently available data and projected school placed requirements, and

will be back in contact with the patrons when this process is complete.

Schools Building Projects

401. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Education the status of the planned development of a new Gaelscoil in Longford town (details supplied). [61456/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The project to which the Deputy refers has been devolved for delivery to Longford & Westmeath Education and Training Board (LWETB).

The brief for this project is the provision of a 12 classroom Primary school on a Greenfield site at Abbeycarton, Longford.

The Pre Stage 1 Report has very recently been submitted to the Department where it is currently being reviewed by the Professional & Technical Section. It is envisaged that the first Stage meeting will take place early in the New Year.

Following Departmental approval of this report, the next step for the ETB's Design Team will be to progress to Stage 2a (Developed Design) and subsequently during Stage 2b, obtain the statutory planning approvals. When these approvals are in place, the project can proceed to tender and construction. It is not possible at this stage to provide a timeline for the completion of the project.

Departmental Programmes

402. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education the supports that are provided by her Department to encourage exchanges between Irish secondary schools or students and continental colleges; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61460/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The main instrument to promote exchanges between Irish and other EU schools is the Erasmus+ programme which supports schools that want to organise learning mobility activities for school pupils and staff. In 2020, over €7m in EU Erasmus +funding was provided as support for both primary and secondary schools in Ireland.

Mobility activities provide learning opportunities to individuals and support internationalisation and institutional development of schools. School staff can undertake activities such as Job-shadowing, Training Courses and Teaching Assignments whilst the Learner mobility option enables pupils to spend periods abroad to study at a partner school.

Léargas as the National Agency for Erasmus+ programme in the school sector provide a suite of supports to applicants and participants such as information sessions and a Public Relations (PR) kit for teachers. In addition Léargas manages support initiatives for schools such as eTwinning. This is a free secure online platform linking a community of more than one million teachers across Europe and supports teachers to find partners and work on joint projects in any curricular area. To-date, a total of 1,890 eTwinning projects have been registered with Irish teachers involving countries from the forty-four participating countries in Europe and beyond. Approximately 1,100 of those projects involved secondary schools.

However, the acquisition of European language competency by students plays a key part in the success of such mobilities and exchanges. The Deputy will be aware that Languages Con-

nect is Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education which aims to increase and diversify the range of languages taught and learned. The Department of Education, through Post Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI) provides funding for the School Exchanges Scheme. Under the Scheme, up to twenty schools annually have been provided with €15,000 in funding over a three year period. The funding can be used towards exchange costs such as flights, to offer scholarships to students who would not otherwise be able to participate, or for other needs that the school identifies as contributing towards language learning on the exchange.

Special Educational Needs

403. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education her plans to amend the minimum qualification required for appointment to the role of special needs assistant; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61585/21]

404. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education if she has sought expert opinion on the campaign to change the minimum qualifications required for appointment to the role of special needs assistant; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61588/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 403 and 404 together.

Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) play a huge role in helping to ensure the inclusion of pupils with significant care needs in education and in school life. This was acknowledged in the Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme (SNAs) published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2018.

The Review made a number of recommendations regarding SNAs including referencing the training needs of SNAs. In this regard, the NCSE recommended that a new national training programme at Level 5 of the National Qualification Framework be developed for existing SNAs who do not have the requisite level of training and for new SNAs on appointment. The NCSE also recommended that training tailored to the specific complex needs of some students being cared for by SNAs would also be provided.

The policy advice has been considered by the Department. It was decided that priority should be given to the development of a training programme for SNAs who may not have had a recent opportunity to access a training programme tailored to their role. The new first national training course for SNAs provided by UCD aims to enhance the knowledge, skills and expertise of SNAs whose work is central to the inclusion of students with additional care and complex needs in school life. The programme is fully funded by the Department and delivered at no cost to the SNA.

This is the first national training programme for SNAs employed in schools and is tailored to their needs. As this is the first programme, it is appropriate to take the time to review outcomes which will inform the future approach to ongoing training and professional development of SNAs. Part of that consideration will include accreditation.

Raising the minimum qualification for appointment as a special needs assistant has been referred to the Workplace Relations Commission and the Department has been engaging in that process.

The recruitment and appointment of Special Needs Assistants is a matter for the individual school authority and the Department's circular 36/2020 and 51/2019 sets out the current educational requirements for appointment as a Special Needs Assistant (SNA). In addition, the actual

requirements for a post will vary depending on the specific needs of the children and the school to which the SNA is to be appointed. The Department does not believe that the existing minimum qualifications has impacted on the calibre of person appointed and it is also the case that people with experience and/or higher qualifications than the minimum are often the successful candidate in competitions held by schools.

However, having considered the claim and, in particular, the period of time since they were set, the Department is open to reviewing the position. However, the Department is not yet in a position to indicate when that review might take place but is of the view that the forthcoming review of the SNA contract proposed as part of the Building Momentum national pay agreement should be carried out and implemented first.

Question No. 404 answered with Question No. 403.

Special Educational Needs

405. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Education the number of children who are currently awaiting assistive technology for zero to six, six to 12, 12 to 18 and 18 plus months by county in tabular form.; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61614/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Under the Assistive Technology scheme, as set out in my Department's Circular 0010/2013, funding is provided to schools towards the cost of computers and specialist equipment, which are required for educational purposes.

All equipment provided under this scheme support children with more complex disabilities who, in order to access the school curriculum, require essential specialist equipment.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) through its network of local Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) is responsible for processing applications from schools for special educational needs supports. SENOs also make recommendations to my Department where assistive technology/specialised equipment is required. The NCSE operates within my Department's criteria in making recommendations for support.

In order to qualify for equipment under the assistive technology scheme, a student must have been diagnosed with a physical or communicative disability and must also have a recommendation in a professional assessment that the equipment is essential in order to allow the student to access the curriculum. It must also be clear that the existing I.T. equipment in the school is insufficient to meet the child's needs.

Schools make applications directly to the SENO, providing details of the student's special educational needs or disability, including details of the approach taken by the school in making relevant interventions.

SENOs will review the application, and professional reports provided in support of same, in order to establish whether the criteria of the scheme have been met. They will then make a recommendation to my Department as to whether or not assistive technology is required; and based on this recommendation, my Department will decide on the level of grant, if any, to be provided.

Although equipment is sanctioned under the Assistive Technology scheme for use by particular students, it is the property of the school, and the school's management authority is responsible for maintenance, repair, and insurance of the equipment.

It is the responsibility of each individual school to purchase the equipment after the grant is sanctioned. My Department does not hold a record of the average wait time from start of application to the time a student receives their assistive technology. However, I can confirm that 3,370 applications have been forwarded from the NCSE since January 2021 to date, with 350 applications currently on hand. In addition, all applications for audiology supports for children with hearing impairment and equipment to assist children with visual impairment are fully up to date and there are currently none outstanding.

In relation to the specific wait times requested from date of application, I have referred to the NCSE for their direct reply.

School Staff

406. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education the reason very few of the 467 teachers on secondment that would be available for substitute work have become available to schools (details supplied); if these teachers have been deployed temporarily to the substitute panels across the country; if not, if she will ensure they are added to the substitute panel and that this panel is made available to all schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61650/21]

408. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education if the approximately 467 teachers on secondment that were to be made available for substitute work have made themselves available to schools given schools continue to report failing to find substitute teachers to cover classes in view of the fact they do not know the way to contact these teachers; the reason the teachers were not deployed temporarily to the substitute panels across the country; and the measures that will be put in place in order that they can be easily accessed by schools. [61655/21]

422. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the mechanism in place for school principals to contact teachers on secondment who have been released in order to be available for substitute work; and the reason these teachers were not deployed temporarily to the substitute panels across the country. [62003/21]

423. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if he will address the issue of principals not being able to contact teachers on secondment who have been released in order to be available for substitute work by placing these teachers on the substitute panels in order they can be easily accessed by schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [62004/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 406, 408, 422 and 423 together.

As the Deputy will be aware, my Department recently contacted schools to outline a wide range of new additional measures to increase the availability of substitutes teachers.

In respect of one of these measures, the Teacher Education support services funded by my Department have made arrangements to release teachers who are on secondment to provide substitute cover in schools. As outlined in the notice to schools, arrangements have been made for available teachers from these services to register on the SubSeeker portal which is available to all schools. Principals can access available substitutes using this portal.

Those staff working in the Teacher Education support services also continue to support schools through their work in the support services when they are not called to provide substitute cover. A number of secondees have also been retained to continue to support the system by

delivering planned priority CPD relating to reforms in Senior Cycle examinable subjects and some limited provision at primary level (e.g. Reading Recovery). All other CPD at both Primary and Post Primary, where substitution is required, will be deferred until after the February 2022 mid-term break. The temporary suspension of CPD will not affect the completion of the Droichead process for Newly Qualified Teachers whose contracts are due to end prior to the mid-term break in February. It is intended that this deferred CPD will be re-scheduled in the period following the February 2022 mid-term break.

This is just one of a number of measures to increase the availability of substitute teachers in schools, including of course the flexibility being provided by Higher Education Institutes to enable students teachers to support schools up to the end of term.

School Management

407. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the decision of the patron body of a school (details supplied) to disband the board and put a single individual in charge, despite the fact that four persons were willing to serve on the board; if she has requested an explanation for this decision; if she will request the patron body to restore the board with the members that are available to serve; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61651/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): In accordance with the provisions of the Education Act 1998, the appointment of a board of management of a school is a matter for the relevant school Patron. Under the provisions of this Act, where a Patron determines that the appointment of a Board is not practicable, the Patron may appoint a manager or managers to perform the functions of the Board.

In the case of the school in question, the Patron has informed the Department that the three year term of office of the Board came to an end on 15 October 2021. The Patron has also determined that the appointment of a Board is not practicable at this time and, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Education Act 1998, appointed a single manager to manage the school. The Deputy will appreciate that the appointment of a board of management is solely a matter for the relevant school Patron and that I have no role in this regard.

Question No. 408 answered with Question No. 406.

Covid-19 Pandemic

409. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of one HEPA filtration device. [61662/21]

410. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of providing a HEPA filtration device to each primary and secondary school classroom in the State. [61663/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 409 and 410 together.

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

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

The Expert Group in its report notes "very good advice is contained in the Department of Education's Practical Steps for the Deployment of Good Ventilation Practices in Schools".

And that "It must be emphasized that ventilation should be delivered as part of a layered strategy of protective measures to control the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19."

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

The Expert Group also note "consider using a portable carbon dioxide (CO2) monitor to identify areas of the school with inadequate ventilation. The Departments guidance outlines CO2 monitors can play a part in providing a useful general indication that areas/rooms may not be adequately ventilated. They can enable occupants to become familiar with the impacts of activities, outdoor weather and window openings on levels of good ventilation. The provision of portable CO2 monitors provides schools with the flexibility to focus their use to those rooms where most beneficial to inform strategies for optimising ventilation in the school.

In excess of 36,000 monitors have been delivered to schools nationwide at a cost of circa €4 million.

A dedicated team has been established in the Department to support schools that may have concerns about ventilation. Officers are also available to contact schools where required, walking through the steps the schools should take to deploy good ventilation practices etc. Where it is not possible for a school to access the expertise of an engineer or architect, and where necessary, a technical assessment to assist the school can be facilitated through the Department.

Schools that identify inadequate ventilation in a room can utilise their minor work grant (for minor improvements) or apply for emergency works grant assistance to address ventilation enhancements on a permanent basis.

The Expert Group also notes the potential use for air cleaners "consider using stand-alone high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter devices to further reduce airborne virus in poorly ventilated spaces".

The Departments Guidance is clear that where the recommended measures in the Practical Steps and poor ventilation continues to exist in a particular room/area, air cleaners may be considered as an additional measure in conjunction with other methods of ventilation that are available. This is line with Expert Group guidance which identifies that in areas with poor ventilation that structural interventions and measures to increase natural ventilation should be completed. Where such structural interventions or measures are not possible in the short term, that consideration should be given to using stand-alone HEPA filter devices in poorly ventilated spaces pending the completion of structural interventions.

There is no one solution that fits all scenarios, each application requires bespoke analysis and selection of the appropriate unit(s) matched to the specific room size and volume. If, following consultation with a supplier a school feels that its individual space may require specific technical specialist advice then the assistance of a Chartered Engineer or Registered Architect can be sought.

The requirement for air cleaners in schools will depend on advices provided to schools by their Architect/Engineer.

Question No. 410 answered with Question No. 409.

An Garda Síochána

411. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education the efforts that have been made to streamline the Garda vetting process for substitute teachers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61669/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Acts 2012 to 2016 (the Vetting Act), which was commenced in April 2016, put in place statutory requirements for the Garda vetting of persons involved in working with children and vulnerable persons.

The Vetting Act applies not just to schools but to any relevant organisation that employs, contracts, permits or places a person in relevant work with children or vulnerable persons. The Vetting Act provides that vetting is conducted by the National Vetting Bureau on foot of an application by a relevant organisation that is registered with it. The vetting legislation and the vetting procedures operated by the National Vetting Bureau fall within the remit of the Minister for Justice.

The Vetting Act provides that a relevant organisation must, other than in certain limited circumstances, obtain a vetting disclosure from the National Vetting Bureau prior to commencing the employment of an employee to undertake relevant work with children or vulnerable adults.

The Department of Justice has recently established an inter-departmental group to undertake a review of Garda vetting arrangements and legislation. The group will make recommendations for amending the legislation and strengthening the Garda vetting process.

School Enrolments

412. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Education her plans to address the shortage of school places in south County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61679/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Department is aware of some local pressures and demand for additional post-primary school places in a number of school planning areas across the country including South Kildare.

However, it is important to note that where enrolment pressures arise, it may not be as a result of lack of accommodation but may be driven by the following factors:

- Duplication of applications – pupils have applied for a place to a number of schools in the area.

- School of choice – pupils can't get a place in their preferred school while there are places in other schools in the town/area.

- Some towns/areas have single sex schools and while places are available in the school they are not available to all pupils.

- External draw – pupils coming from outside the local area.

My Department is working to establish the true extent of any capacity issues through ongoing discussions with the relevant school authorities/patrons. In that context, similar to the process adopted in advance of the current academic year, the Department is engaging with school patron bodies/school authorities to identify particular capacity requirements for the forthcom-

ing year(s) which may necessitate action including, where required, the provision of modular accommodation solutions.

There are over 500 building projects in train for post primary schools around the country. This includes projects for 19 new post primary schools which have been announced to be established since 2018. Additionally, these building projects include a project to provide a new 1,000 pupil school building that will replace and expand the existing Curragh post primary school. This expansion is intended to assist in addressing the post primary school place requirements in the Kildare and Newbridge areas.

The other projects currently underway in South Kildare include projects at:

- Cross & Passion Kilcullen

- Patrician Secondary School Newbridge

- Ardscoil Rathangan

- St. Conleth's Community College Newbridge

- St. Paul's Secondary School, Monasterevin

- Holy Family Secondary School Newbridge (application recently received)

My Department's engagement with Patrons/school authorities is ongoing and is focussed on ensuring that the start of the 2022/23 school year operates as smoothly as possible for all schools and their students.

Special Educational Needs

413. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Education when she expects the National Council for Special Education to complete and submit its policy advice on education provision in special classes and special schools first commissioned in September 2018. [61740/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): In September 2018, the then Minister for Education and Skills requested the NCSE to advise on future educational provision for students in special schools and classes and to make recommendations on the provision required to enable them to achieve better outcomes.

The NCSE strives to ensure that its policy advice is informed by robust and wide-ranging consultative and research processes. Its policy advice is always informed by international best practice.

A lot of work has been done and NCSE published a progress report in November, 2019. At that stage, NCSE had reviewed existing educational provision in Ireland, conducted a detailed literature review, consulted various stakeholder groups and visited a number of Irish schools. NCSE had also looked at fully inclusive schools and practice in Canada and Portugal.

The report found that no evidence to show that one type of special education placement is better that another. It also stated that any decision to move towards greater inclusion would require careful consideration and planning. It is not something that could be achieved in the short term.

Since the publication of the progress report, NCSE has conducted further research and anal-

ysis, engaged in a public consultation survey and has received further submissions and expert inputs. It has also examined the implications arising from the UNCRPD.

Before the advice is finalised, every effort is being made to ensure that NCSE has consulted widely with a view to developing shared understandings on the critical issues involved and proposed solutions.

The policy advice is expected to be completed in early 2022.

Covid-19 Tests

414. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education if antigen testing will be extended to post-primary schools and not just primary schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61846/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Ensuring that schools can remain open and continue to operate safely has been a key priority for the Department of Education. The Department has always been guided by public health advice in relation to appropriate COVID-19 infection prevention and control measures in place in schools. These measures protect students/pupils, their parents and school staff and are very effective when adhered to.

The Department of Health and the HSE, working in collaboration with the Department of Education recently announced a programme in which antigen tests will be made available to children in primary schools. These arrangements for students and staff in post primary schools are identical to those in place for confirmed cases and close contacts in the wider society.

Schools are still required to undertake the two most important actions to prevent the introduction and spread of Covid-19 (and other respiratory viruses), by ensuring no-one with new acute symptoms attend class, and that all recommended infection prevention and control measures are in place in line with school Covid response plans.

Public Sector Pay

415. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Education further to Parliamentary Question No. 274 of 26 November 2020, if the upgrade of the payroll system has been completed; when the online payslip option will be available; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61859/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy will be aware, my Department provides a payroll service to primary, post-primary, non-teaching and retired staff. The service has some 130,000 users and is managed by my Department's Payroll Division in Athlone.

The payroll system is an electronic system and a number of processes are already highly automated. For instance, the submission of claims for payment through the Online Claims System (OLCS).

I am pleased to be able to advise the Deputy that my Department has concluded the upgrade of the school staff payroll software systems, as planned, in 2021. The primary purpose of this upgrade is to receive continued support from the Department's vendor and to upgrade payroll software systems.

I can also advise that following the completion of this upgrade, that my Department is now progressing a project to deliver access to electronic payslips for all users in 2022.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

416. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education if funding will be provided for CO2 monitors for a school (details supplied). [61931/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Department's ventilation guidance for schools is very clear and practical on the steps to be taken by all schools to manage ventilation levels.

Managing ventilation is just one of a suite of public health measures in place to keep our schools safe. Updated guidance for schools on Practical Steps for the Deployment of Good Ventilation Practices in Schools was provided at the end of May following the work of an expert group that carefully considered the role of ventilation in managing COVID-19. A copy of the guidance is published on the Gov.ie website.

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

The guidance outlines that Carbon Dioxide (CO2) monitors can play a part in providing a useful general indication that areas/rooms may not be adequately ventilated. They can enable occupants to become familiar with the impacts of activities, outdoor weather and window openings on levels of good ventilation. The provision of portable CO2 monitors provides schools with the flexibility to focus their use to those rooms where most beneficial to inform strategies for optimising ventilation in the school.

In excess of 35,400 monitors were dispatched in the initial delivery phase. In excess of a further 1,500 have since been dispatched to schools who requested and were approved for additional CO2 monitors.

St Teresa's National School Balbriggan received nine CO2 monitors as part of it's original allocation. To date the Department has not received a request from the school for additional CO2 monitors.

School Enrolments

417. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education if additional resources will be provided for a school (details supplied) to allow for an increase in the student population specifically in order that additional first year students can be taken in for the 2022 academic year. [61932/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Department is aware of some local pressures and demand for additional post-primary school places in a number of school planning areas across the country including the Swords school planning area.

However, it is important to note that where enrolment pressures arise, it may not be as a result of lack of accommodation but may be driven by the following factors:

- Duplication of applications – pupils have applied for a place to a number of schools in the area.

- School of choice – pupils can't get a place in their preferred school while there are places in other schools in the town/area.

- Some towns/areas have single sex schools and while places are available in the school they are not available to all pupils.

- External draw – pupils coming from outside the local area.

My Department is working to establish the true extent of any capacity issues through ongoing discussions with the relevant school authorities/patrons. In that context, similar to the process adopted in advance of the current academic year, the Department is engaging with school patron bodies/school authorities to identify particular capacity requirements for the forthcoming year(s) which may necessitate action including, where required, the provision of modular accommodation solutions.

As the Deputy is aware, a new 1,000 pupil school building was completed in 2020 for the school in question to assist in addressing the post primary school place requirements in the Swords school planning area.

Other projects currently underway in post primary schools in Swords include extensions and refurbishments at :

St. Finian's Community College - extension to provide for a long term projected enrolment of 1,000 pupils.

Loreto College - extension and refurbishment to cater for a long term projected enrolment of 1,000 pupils.

My Department's engagement with Patrons/school authorities is ongoing and is focussed on ensuring that the start of the 2022/23 school year operates as smoothly as possible for all schools and their students.

Schools Administration

418. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the status of the transfer of ownership of lands located at a school (details supplied) to her Department. [61992/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The property referred to by the Deputy is in the ownership of the Patron of the school. The Patron has recently informed my Department that they are considering changes to the registered ownership of the property to reflect the previous changes in trusteeship of the school. The Patron previously changed the trusteeship of the school to Le Chéile, an education trust which has been established by a number of religious congregations who operate schools. In line with the terms of the Deed of Trust in place for this school my Department is currently considering this issue and will be in contact with the Patron to discuss further.

Departmental Data

419. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the number of school inspectors in her Department; and the number of these inspectors that are registered with the Teaching Council. [62000/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): A total of 135.4 whole-time equivalent inspectors are serving in the Department of Education currently. The Department is not aware of the number of these inspectors that are registered with the Teaching Council.

An Garda Síochána

420. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the status of a centralised system for vetting SNAs. [62001/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Acts 2012 to 2016 (the Vetting Act), which was commenced in April 2016, put in place statutory requirements for the Garda vetting of persons involved in working with children and vulnerable persons.

The Vetting Act applies not just to schools but to any relevant organisation that employs, contracts, permits or places a person in relevant work with children or vulnerable persons. The Vetting Act provides that vetting is conducted by the National Vetting Bureau on foot of an application by a relevant organisation that is registered with it. The vetting legislation and the vetting procedures operated by the National Vetting Bureau fall within the remit of the Minister for Justice.

The Vetting Act provides that a relevant organisation must, other than in certain limited circumstances, obtain a vetting disclosure from the National Vetting Bureau prior to commencing the employment of an employee to undertake relevant work with children or vulnerable adults.

The Department of Justice has recently established an inter-departmental group to undertake a review of Garda vetting arrangements and legislation. The group will make recommendations for amending legislation and strengthening the Garda vetting process and the feasibility of the introduction of a centralised system for vetting SNA's can be considered as part of this work.

Public Sector Pay

421. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the status of the implementation of an electronic payroll system. [62002/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy will be aware, my Department provides a payroll service to primary, post-primary, non-teaching and retired staff. The service has some 130,000 users and is managed by my Department's Payroll Division in Athlone.

The payroll system is an electronic system and a number of processes are already highly automated. For instance, the submission of leave absences for school staff and claims for payment for substitution through the Online Claims System (OLCS).

I am pleased to be able to advise the Deputy that my Department has concluded the upgrade of the school staff payroll software systems, as planned, in 2021. The primary purpose of this upgrade is to receive continued support from the Department's vendor and to upgrade payroll software systems.

Question No. 422 answered with Question No. 406.

Question No. 423 answered with Question No. 406.

Community Employment Schemes

424. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will revise the offer of a gratuity payment to community employment supervisors as part of the long-standing pension claim; if she will consider an earlier start date given that a large cohort of community employment supervisors are not being adequately rewarded; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61682/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien): As the Deputy will be aware, CE supervisors and CE assistant supervisors have been seeking for several years, through their union representatives, SIPTU and Forsa, the allocation of Exchequer funding to implement a 2008 Labour Court recommendation relating to the provision of a pension scheme for CE supervisors and CE assistant supervisors who are employed by CE scheme sponsors.

This claim creates some difficulties because the State is not the employer of the CE supervisors.

Within this context, officials from my Department and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform held discussions on proposals to progress and resolve this complex issue, while having regard to the wider budgetary framework. Department officials also held discussions with unions representing CE supervisors and CE assistant supervisors.

At the start of April this year, agreement was reached between the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and the Minister for Social Protection on proposals to resolve the long-standing issue. These proposals included a financial package.

Since that time, discussions on these proposals took place between my Department and the unions representing CE supervisors and CE assistant supervisors, in consultation with other relevant Government Departments; the Department of Expenditure and Reform and the Department of Finance.

Department officials wrote to both SIPTU and Fórsa recently setting out the terms of a full and final settlement which will involve a once off ex-gratia payment to CE supervisors and assistant supervisors on reaching pension age. The total value of the financial package now on the table is in excess of €24 million.

The scheme will apply to CE supervisors and CE assistant supervisors who have retired since 2008, subject to qualifying criteria, and has the potential to benefit up to 2,200 existing and former CE supervisors and CE assistant supervisors.

The LCR recommendation issued in 2008. This is why employment as a CE supervisor or assistant supervisor, from this date, is covered by the terms of the settlement for this ex-gratia payment.

The current proposal is now under consideration by the representative unions and it would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this time.

Social Welfare Schemes

425. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of dairy farmers in receipt of farm assist by county; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61909/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Farm Assist is a means-tested payment for low-income farmers under the Jobseeker's Allowance Scheme. Recipient details by county are set out in the table below. I am advised that my Department does not hold information of the type of farming recipients engage in; accordingly the below refers to all recipients of Farm Assist.

County	Farm Assist recipients
Carlow	37
Cavan	178
Clare	211
Cork	347
Donegal	908
Dublin	16
Galway	465
Kerry	423
Kildare	17
Kilkenny	54
Laois	42
Leitrim	202
Limerick	88
Longford	103
Louth	48
Mayo	805
Meath	36
Monaghan	239
Offaly	47
Roscommon	167
Sligo	127
Tipperary	163
Waterford	39
Westmeath	62
Wexford	111
Wicklow	27
Total	4,962

Social Welfare Appeals

426. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a decision will be made on a disability allowance appeal by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61126/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered in that office on 25 November 2021. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant Departmental papers and comments by the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought. When these papers have been received from the Department, the case in question will be referred to an Appeals Officer who will make a summary decision on the appeal based on the documentary evidence presented or, if necessary, hold an oral appeal hearing. The outcome of

the appeal will be communicated to the person concerned as soon as possible.

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

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Appeals

427. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a decision will issue to a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61195/21]

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

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

This is defined as requiring, from another person, continual supervision and frequent assistance throughout the day in connection with normal bodily functions or continual supervision in order to avoid danger to him or herself and likely to require that level of care for at least twelve months.

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

The person concerned was notified on 9 March 2021 of this decision, the reason for it and of her right of review and appeal.

The person concerned requested a review of this decision, submitting additional evidence in support. Following this and subsequent appeal the decision remained unchanged.

The person concerned requested an additional review and submitted further medical evidence on 17th November 2021.

Additional information was requested from the person concerned on 9 December 2021.

Once this information is received the application will be processed without delay and the person concerned will be notified directly of the outcome.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Cybersecurity Policy

428. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the measures that are in place to ensure that the social welfare infrastructure is not subject to cyberattack; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61203/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department implements a security-by-design and defence-in-depth approach to cyber security. My Department

also has 24/7 cyber defensive systems in place which react to any threat to its systems in the event of a cyber incident or security breach. All systems are monitored on a 24/7 basis. My Department also works closely with the National Cyber Security Centre and the Office of the Government CIO to ensure that best practice principles are followed regarding cyber security.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Benefits

429. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if matters raised by a person (details supplied) regarding self-employed persons will receive a response. [61222/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The matters raised by the person concerned relate to the rate of payment of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment; the rate of a Jobseeker's payment arising from their transfer to standard jobseeker payments; and their potential entitlement to the new Benefit Payment for persons aged 65 years.

The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) was introduced as an emergency measure to provide an income support to those who had lost their employment as a result of Covid. Initially, payment was made at a weekly rate of €350.

From 26 June 2020, the rate at which the PUP is paid was linked to the amount that individuals previously earned. This ensured the sustainability of the scheme and made it more targeted and fairer. In determining the rate payable, the objective was to ensure that recent earnings were taken into account. This is consistent with the approach underpinning short-term income support schemes such as Jobseeker's Benefit and Jobseeker's Allowance.

The person concerned was self-employed prior to claiming the PUP. The rate of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment for a self-employed person is calculated by reference to their reckonable income in either 2018 or 2019, whichever is the greater. In 2018, the person had average weekly earnings of €111; in 2019, their income was below the threshold of €5,000 at which self-employed PRSI contributions are payable. On that basis the PUP was paid at a rate of €203 from 26 June 2020.

With the reopening of the economy it is important in the interest of fairness and sustainability to restore standard Jobseeker terms in a controlled and considered manner. The need for exceptional measures has diminished as more and more employees close their PUP claims to return to work. To that end, the process of transitioning persons in receipt of the PUP to standard Jobseeker schemes commenced in October 2021. The person concerned does not qualify for Jobseekers Benefit Self-Employed as she has no qualifying PRSI record in 2019 which forms the Governing Contribution Year for claims made in 2021. The person concerned applied for and was awarded Jobseekers Allowance, which is a means tested payment. Payment was awarded at a weekly rate of €164 as the person has an occupational pension of €39 which must be taken into account in the calculation of any entitlement to Jobseekers Allowance.

The Benefit Payment for 65 year olds was introduced in line with the Programme for Government commitment, to provide a benefit payment for people who are aged 65 and who are required to retire, or who chose to retire, without a requirement to sign on, engage in activation measures or be available for and genuinely seeking work.

To be eligible for the payment a person must satisfy all the qualifying conditions of the scheme. The Governing Contribution Year is the second last complete tax year, for example, for a claim in 2022 the PRSI record from 2020 is used to establish eligibility.

The attribution of contributions in respect of periods impacted by the pandemic is intended to ensure that persons entitled to and in receipt of certain Covid-19 income supports, including PUP, will not be disadvantaged in accessing social insurance benefits in the future.

The legislation underpinning the measure makes provision for the Minister for Social Protection, with the consent of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and having considered certain matters set out in the legislation, to prescribe the number of self-employment contributions to be attributed to a self-employed contributor.

A self-employed contributor has a period of time following the end of the contribution year to remit and pay his or her social insurance liability for that contribution year. For example, self-employed contributors have until the end of October 2021 to file their self-assessment tax returns for 2020, including the payment of social insurance contributions where they are liable to do so for that year.

Once data on the social insurance returns made by self-employed workers in respect of 2020 are available towards the end of this year or early in 2022, I and my colleague the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform will be in a position to prescribe, as appropriate, the number of self-employment contributions required to protect the social insurance entitlements of self-employed workers who were in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment in 2020 and who were not in a position to discharge their social insurance liability for that year.

In the event that the person concerned does not have a liability to pay self-employment contributions in respect of the 2020 year, they may be entitled to attributed contributions as set out above. On that basis, the person may qualify for the Benefit Payment for 65-year olds once all the other eligibility criteria for the scheme are met.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Departmental Reports

430. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will immediately publish a report (details supplied). [61240/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Cost of Disability in Ireland report was published on Tuesday 7 December and is available on the Government website.

Social Welfare Payments

431. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a working family payment will be reinstated to a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61257/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Working Family Payment (WFP) is an in work supplementary payment which provides additional financial support to employees on low earnings with children. Should a WFP recipient become ill during a WFP award period and qualifies for Illness Benefit (IB) or Occupational Injuries Benefit, WFP is only payable for 6 weeks in conjunction with either benefit. If their IB claim extends for more than 6 weeks, the WFP claim is stopped until either the WFP claimant resumes paid employment and submits a final medical certificate to the Department or until the WFP award period expires (whichever is the earlier)

The person concerned had an active (open) IB claim with effect from 4 October 2021.

An officer wrote to the person concerned on 26 November 2021, advising them that their WFP payment had been stopped as they had an active IB claim for over 6 weeks.

The person's IB claim was subsequently closed and their employment resumption details were submitted. Following their employment resumption on 18 October 2021, the person's WFP payment was reinstated from 2 December 2021.

A weekly payment and any arrears owing will have issued to their nominated financial account on 9 December 2021.

The person concerned was notified in writing of this decision on 7 December 2021.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Personal Public Service Numbers

432. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a PPS number will issue in the case of a person (details supplied) who appears to have applied twice; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61272/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): A Personal Public Service (PPS) Number is a unique reference number that helps a person access social welfare benefits and public services in Ireland. If applying for a PPS Number to take up employment, a person must have a signed offer of employment from an employer confirming when the job is due to start or when it started. This letter should be on company headed paper with the employer's contact details and employer/company registered number. A person does not need a PPS Number if they are looking for work or for an employer to make an offer of employment.

Some other examples of why a person may need a PPS Number are:

- to apply for a social welfare payment

- to access medical services

- to apply for or exchange a driver's licence

- to access other public services

- to register for a course in a school or college

The person concerned applied for a PPS Number on 23 September 2021. The application was returned to the person concerned on 18 October 2021 for evidence of why a PPS Number was required. When the person did not respond by the 9 November 2021, the application automatically expired.The person concerned applied again on 18 November 2021 stating the PPS Number was required for employment purposes. The person concerned was subsequently asked to provide a signed letter from an employer confirming the offer of employment. It is open to the person concerned to submit the requested documentation and the application will be processed.I trust this clarifies the matter.

Social Welfare Schemes

433. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated cost to increase the amount of income disregarded in respect of the farm assist scheme from 30% to 45%. [61275/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Farm Assist Scheme is a means tested support for farmers on low incomes who satisfy the scheme's statutory conditions including a means test. Recipients retain the advantages of Jobseeker's allowance such as the retention of secondary benefits and access to activation programmes. The 2021 Further Revised Estimate provides for expenditure of €61.7 million on the scheme.

The means test is flexible to allow for significant fluctuations from one year to the next. Virtually all income is included in the means test but it is assessed in different ways and certain disregards apply. Payments received under the Rural Environmental Protection Scheme (REPS), the Agri-Environmental Options Scheme (AEOS), the National Parks and Wildlife Service Farm Plan Scheme (NPWS) and the Green Low-Carbon Agri-Environment Scheme (GLAS) attract a disregard of €2,540, with 50% of the balance assessed as means.

There are annual disregards for dependent children; €254 for each of the first two children and €381 for the third and other children. Remaining farm income and income from off-farm self-employment is then assessed at 70%. In line with other means tested social welfare schemes, the first €20,000 of capital is not assessed.

On 29th November I announced the publication of the Social Welfare Bill which will enact Budget 2022 measures. Included in this Budget Bill is provision for an extensive expansion to the list of Agri- Environmental schemes which will qualify towards the disregard of €2,540. The measure will support the Government's climate change agenda and will act as an incentive to farmers to participate in the schemes.

The approximate estimated annual cost of increasing the income disregard from 30% to 45% would be €4.3 million. This estimated cost is for a full year and based on current numbers of farm assist recipients.

As part of Budget 2022 I secured an increase of €5 per week in the personal rate for Farm Assist which will increase to €208 and proportionate increases for adult and child dependents will also apply. These increases will be paid from 3 January 2022.

Any changes to the means test for the Farm Assist scheme would have to be considered in a budgetary context and within the scope of the overall resources available for welfare improvements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Pension Provisions

434. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will address a matter (details supplied) regarding occupational pensions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61317/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Pensions Commission was established in November 2020 to examine the sustainability of the State Pension system and the Social Insurance Fund, in fulfilment of a Programme for Government commitment. The Commission was an independent body comprised of knowledgeable and experienced academics, pension experts, members of civil society and representatives of workers and employ-

ers. The Commission has completed its work and its report was published on 7th October 2021. The Commission's Report, its Technical Sub-Committee's working papers, and submissions made to the Commission are available on the Commission's website, pensionscommission.gov.ie.

The Commission's Report is a comprehensive report that takes account of an assessment of various analyses of population, labour force and expenditure projections; an examination of international approaches; and responses to an extensive consultation process. It has unambiguously established that the current State Pension system is not sustainable into the future and that changes are needed, and it has set out a wide range of recommendations in this regard - including measures to increase Social Insurance Fund (PRSI) income.

The report has been referred to the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands and to the Commission for Taxation and Welfare for their views. I understand that both the Chair of the Commission, Ms. Josephine Feehily and the Chair of its Technical Sub-Committee, Ms. Roma Burke met with the Joint Committee on 17th November 2021. Officials from my Department also attended this meeting.

In the interests both of older people and of future generations of older people, the Government intends to consider the comprehensive and far reaching recommendations in the Commission's Report very carefully and holistically. My officials will work over the coming months to examine each of the recommendations. They will consult across Government through the Cabinet Committee system.

I think it is really important that we complete that work before reaching conclusions. I intend to bring a recommended response and implementation plan to Government by the end of March 2022.

The State Pension is the bedrock of the pension system in Ireland. It is extremely effective at ensuring that our pensioners do not experience poverty. This Government is committed to ensuring that this remains the case for current pensioners, those nearing State Pension age and today's young workers including those who are only starting their careers.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

435. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her attention has been drawn to the fact that 66% of live performers experienced a 90% to 100% income loss from their profession due to Covid-related restrictions, that 20% have been forced to take up employment outside the industry, that 56% are considering leaving the industry and that 45.8% are struggling to pay household bills; the measures she is putting in place to support this sector following the latest round of restrictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61351/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the economy has reopened we have seen a huge reduction in the number of customers receiving the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) across all sectors including the arts and entertainment sector which fell by approximately 91% since the height of the pandemic in May 2020 when some 14,300 recipients were being supported by a PUP payment as with just under 1,300 recipients last week. The majority of workers who exited PUP returned to employment.

The PUP scheme, which closed for applications on 8th July 2021, has been re-opened again

specifically to support workers who lose their employment as a direct result of the introduction of new public health restrictions effective from 7th December 2021, which mainly affects workers in the night-time economy including the live entertainment industry. Workers who lose their employment on or after Tuesday 7 December because of the effects of these restrictions are eligible to apply for PUP. This includes self-employed who lose their employment or experience a significant reduction in their income as a consequence of these latest restrictions.

As the current restrictions are targeted and limited in nature a sectoral approach is required. On 8th December, the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media announced a funding package of €50m to support the Live Performance Sector which includes €34 million funding for the Live Performance Support Scheme. The Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media is also examining how further supports can be provided to the broader events sector. In addition, the Minister for Finance also announced plans for an extension of support for businesses under the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme and the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme.

The situation will be kept under close review in accordance with public health advice on the progress in suppressing the Covid-19 virus and the impacts of restrictions on the labour market.

I trust that this clarifies the position.

Social Welfare Payments

436. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a maximum guardianship payment will be reinstated for a person (details supplied); and if all arrears due will be expedited. [61402/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Guardian's payment is payable for a child between the ages of 18 and 22 if the child is attending a course of full time education.

Both of the children for whom the person concerned was receiving Guardian's Payment, are over age 18. In order to continue to receive payment, confirmation of attendance in full time education must be provided. Forms issued to the person concerned in early September, to be completed and stamped by the relevant school/college, confirming attendance. As no response was received, the forms were re-issued on 24/11/2021. To date the completed forms have not been received.

As soon as the completed and stamped forms are received, payment will be reinstated and any arrears due will be issued.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

State Pensions

437. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans to enable persons to buy voluntary contributions towards entitlement to a contributory old age pension if they do not have 520 paid contributions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61437/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The purpose of the voluntary contribution scheme is to provide persons who were, but are no longer, compulsorily

insured under social insurance with the opportunity to pay contributions directly to my Department. Voluntary contributions ensure continuity of social insurance for pension purposes during periods where former contributors are no longer insured as employed or self-employed contributors or are not in receipt of credited employment contributions.

The scheme's entry criteria require applicants to have at least 520 social insurance contributions paid from either employment or self-employment. Furthermore, an application must be made within 60 months (5 years) from the end of the contribution year during which the applicant last paid a compulsory social insurance contribution or was last awarded a credited employment contribution.

I am satisfied that the voluntary contribution scheme is effective in providing those persons with a way to maintain their social insurance record for pension purposes. There are no plans at this time to change the qualifying conditions.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

438. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if persons that lost their job due to Covid-19 restrictions before 6 December 2021 can apply for the reopened pandemic unemployment payment; and if they can transition from other unemployment payments, for example, jobseeker's allowance if they signed on before the pandemic unemployment payment reopened. [61447/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): With effect from Tuesday 7th December the Government announced the introduction of a range of public health measures to further reduce the spread of Covid-19 and a limited re-opening of PUP specifically designed to support those workers who lose their employment as a direct result of the introduction of the new restrictions.

All workers, including the self-employed, who lose their employment on or after Tuesday 7 December because of the effects of the new public health restrictions are eligible to apply for PUP.

Customers who lost their employment prior to this date are eligible to apply for a jobseekers payment. Where they have sufficient PRSI social insurance contributions paid they may be eligible for Jobseeker's Benefit subject to satisfying the scheme conditions. Where they do not qualify for Jobseeker's Benefit, they may be eligible to apply for means tested Jobseeker's Allowance. The maximum weekly personal rate for a Jobseeker payment for a single person is €203; for a couple is €337.70 and for a couple with two children is €420.70.

I hope that this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Appeals

439. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on the review of a decision on a disability allowance application in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61517/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Based on the evidence supplied in support of this person's application, her application for disability allowance (DA)

was disallowed on the grounds that the medical qualifying condition was not satisfied. The person in question was notified in writing of this decision on 26 October 2021.

They requested a review of the decision by a deciding officer (DO) and submitted additional medical evidence for consideration. Following a review the original decision was upheld and the person concerned was notified of this decision on 7 December 2021.

The person in question has requested an appeal with the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO). All the relevant papers were submitted to the SWAO by my department on 9 December 2021. The SWAO will be in touch with them in due course in relation to the progress of the appeal.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Benefits

440. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her Department will assist in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61534/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The rate of Illness Benefit payable in individual cases is determined by reference to the applicant's weekly average earnings in the relevant tax year and there is no discretion available to increase the rate in instances involving particular types of illness.

If the person concerned is experiencing difficulties meeting his financial commitments he should contact the Department's representative, formerly known as a Community Welfare Officer, at his local Intreo Centre so that an assessment of his circumstances can be carried out to determine whether he might qualify for assistance under the terms of the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Disability Services

441. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Social Protection if Ability Programme funding will be made available through budget 2022; the services offered through the Ability Programme that were funded until July 2021 that will continue in 2022; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61613/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Ability Programme was introduced in June 2018 for a three-year period and was a pre-activation programme for young people with disabilities. The funding for the programme amounted to approximately €16 million over the three-year period and was co-funded by the EU and the Irish Exchequer under the EU's ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) Operational Programme 2014-2020.

The aim of the Ability Programme was to help bring young people with disabilities who are not work-ready closer to the labour market through engagement in training and personal development activities, to be followed by an incremental exposure to work. The programme was delivered by 27 community and voluntary organisations from around the country, selected on foot of a competitive process.

The projects funded were designed to assist young people in their transition from school to further education and employment. Pobal was contracted by my Department to manage the programme. At the end of the programme, some 2,173 young people with disabilities aged between 15 and 29 years were supported over the 3 year period, which represented 82% of the overall programme target.

The Ability Programme was due to conclude at the end of June. However, funding for the programme was extended by two months to the end of August 2021. This additional period was to allow organisations extra time to transition and support participants appropriately.

On 30 July, I announced over €7.5 million in funding under the Dormant Accounts Action Plan 2021 to support initiatives under the heading of "Measures to Support Employment, Education and Training Outcomes for People with a Disability". Projects were selected following a competitive process organised by Pobal that evaluated applications against a number of predefined criteria. A funding package for 45 projects nationwide is now in place and designed to support people with disabilities to improve their employment skills, advance their education or start their own business. The 45 projects being funded are expected to benefit almost 2,300 participants and include the 27 former Ability Programme organisations. The delivery period for these projects is from 1 September 2021 to 31 December 2022.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Tax and Social Welfare Codes

442. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her Department is of the view that the 1997 Revenue Commissioners courier sector tax agreement which was discontinued in 2019 was in keeping with her Department's factors for determining the employment status of courier workers (details supplied). [61639/21]

443. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of test cases that were undertaken prior to her Department's establishment of criteria in 1995 to determine the formal insurability and employment status of courier workers. [61640/21]

446. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason her Department did not amend the 1995 determining factors for employment status of courier drivers following the outcome of a Supreme Court case (details supplied). [61643/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 442, 443 and 446 together.

The concept of a 'test case' has been misinterpreted over the years.

In 1995 the Social Welfare Appeals Office considered an appeal against a Departmental Deciding Officer determination that a person working as a courier, was in the particular circumstances of the case, employed rather than self-employed. The Appeals Office determined on appeal that the worker was in fact self-employed. In reaching this determination the Appeals Officer set out a number of criteria that informed the decision and that could then be used on a case by case basis when deciding whether a worker was employed or self-employed. It is not the case that the determination by the Appeals Officer was used to classify all people working as couriers as self-employed.

While Deciding Officers in my Department have regard to the findings of the Appeals Office, they are required to assess each new case on an individual basis, considering all of the

terms and conditions of the particular employment. Accordingly, subsequent to the 1995 Appeals Office decision, and taking account of the criteria set out in that decision, Scope Section has found some couriers to be employees and others to be self-employed.

In the years following the decision of the Appeals Officer in 1995, the evolving case law of the time clarified and expanded the criteria that should be applied in determining questions of employment status. These criteria were codified into the first Code of Practice, published in 2001. This Code was devised by the Employment Status Group, involving trade union and employer representatives, under the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness and has been recently updated following consultation with the same groups.

The outcome of any case with respect to a worker in a particular occupation or sector is not applied to an occupation or entire sector. All workers are entitled to a determination of their status on an individual basis with each application for a determination subject to decision on its own merits taking account of the criteria set out in the Code of Practice.

The criteria used for deciding the insurability of couriers are the same criteria used for deciding the insurability of individuals in all other sectors. This criteria is set out clearly in the Code of Practice on Determining Employment Status and it is based on case law set down by the Courts. The Henry Denny case (Henry Denny & Sons (Ireland) Ltd v Minister for Social Welfare [1997] IESC 9), to which the Deputy refers, is one of many High Court and Supreme Court cases which are instructive in employment status cases. Decisions made by my Department are guided by the case law as it evolves. For this reason, an indicative list of key Court decisions is contained at page 33 of the Code of Practice.

In relation to the Revenue Tax Briefing of 1997 referred to by the Deputy, it is important to emphasise the distinction between the remits of my Department and that of the Office of the Revenue Commissioners. While I understand that the Revenue Commissioners has had regard to the criteria first identified in 1995 and subsequently expanded and codified in 2001 (updated in the past year), the Revenue Commissioners make decisions on tax matters under statutory powers granted to them and are required to act independently of Government in the exercise of their functions.

My Department has the statutory power to determine which social insurance class applies to an individual. The Revenue Commissioners do not make decisions regarding social insurance status, only tax matters. Equally, decisions of my Department as to PRSI insurability do not affect tax liability.

I encourage any worker who has doubts about their social insurance classification to apply to Scope Section by e-mailing: scope@welfare.ie, phoning: +353 (0)1 673 2585 (9am-5pm) or writing to:

Scope Section

Department of Social Protection

Áras Mhic Dhiarmada

Store Street

Dublin 1

D01 WY03

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

Question No. 443 answered with Question No. 442.

Tax and Social Welfare Codes

444. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Social Protection the specific legal basis for an appeals officer in 1995 to establish a set of criteria in relation to determining the employment status of a group and class of workers specifically in relation to establishing a set of criteria to determine the employment status of courier workers. [61641/21]

445. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reasoning of her Department for each of the three factors established by her Department in 1995 with regard to the determination of employment status of courier drivers (details supplied). [61642/21]

447. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a statement (details supplied) by the Secretary General of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs in a letter to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Public Accounts in September 2000 represents an accurate account of her Department's actions. [61644/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 444, 445 and 447 together.

The role of the Social Welfare Appeals Office is to determine appeals against decisions of Deciding Officers and/or Designated Persons of the Department of Social Protection. The legislation currently governing the appeals process is contained in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 of Part 10 of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 and the Social Welfare (Appeals) Regulations, 1998 (S.I. No. 108 of 1998).

Section 300(2) of the 2005 Act gives statutory power to Deciding Officers of the Department to determine questions relating to the insurability of employment for social insurance purposes. All such determinations/ decisions can be appealed under the provisions of Section 311 of the 2005 Act to an Appeals Officer. The equivalent provisions in relation to a decision made by an Appeals Officer in 1995 were Sections 247(2) and 257 of the Social Welfare (Consolidation) Act 1993 respectively.

I am advised that in October 2000, the then Secretary General of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs in correspondence to the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee made reference to a number of representative 'test cases' in the courier sector that were selected in 1993/1994 for investigation and formal decision as some couriers considered themselves self-employed while others regarded themselves as employees. I am further advised that these cases were not selected to determine the employment status of all workers in that sector but rather to identify criteria that could be used by Deciding Officers and Appeals Officers for the purpose of assessing each case on an individual basis and to improve the quality and consistency of decision making in relation to the determination of whether an individual was employed or self-employed. Depending on the circumstances of the particular case, as assessed by reference to these criteria, an individual decision would be made in the case.

In one particular case which I understand has become known as the '1995 decision' the Scope section of the Department determined that the courier was employed under a contract of service – i.e. an employee – and insurable at class A PRSI. This decision was appealed by both the worker and the company to the Social Welfare Appeals Office. Following an oral hearing, the Appeals Officer's decision in July 1995 was that, on balance, the worker was operating under a contract for services and, therefore, was deemed to be self-employed. The Appeals Officer considered the following were critical factors in reaching the decision; lack of (company)

control, no requirement to provide personal service, being able to enlist help of others (substitution) and refuse jobs, ability to do work for other companies and flexibility in the hours of attendance. The evidence adduced at the oral hearing included that the worker provided his own vehicle and equipment, was responsible for expenses, including tax, insurance and maintenance and payment was made on the basis of rate per job.

The Secretary General in his correspondence of October 2000 outlined that the Appeals Officer's decision established the criteria that were generally accepted as relevant for consideration when determining the employment status of workers in that sector.

It is my understanding that this approach was a precursor to the subsequent development on a tripartite basis of the Code of Practice for Determining Employment or Self-Employment Status of Individuals under the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness in 2001. The Code was subsequently updated in 2007 under the Towards 2016 Social Partnership Agreement with a further update in this past year.

Therefore, since 2001, the criteria used for deciding insurability status are set out in the Code of Practice on Determining Employment Status. The Code was updated further this year by an interdepartmental working group comprising my Department, the Revenue Commissioners and the Workplace Relations Commission. I published the revised Code on 21 July 2021.

Accordingly, neither the '1995 decision' nor any other decision is used by the Scope Section of the Department or the Social Welfare Appeals Office as a precedent and they do not form any part of the deliberations in such cases. Cases are determined on a case by case basis having regard to the Code of Practice and the case law from the Courts.

Question No. 445 answered with Question No. 444.

Question No. 446 answered with Question No. 442.

Question No. 447 answered with Question No. 444.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

448. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason access to the pandemic unemployment payment has been refused for a musician (details supplied); if she will address this matter given the significant loss of future income due to Covid-19 restrictions; the eligibility criteria for a musician to get the payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61661/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) was introduced as an emergency measure to provide an income support to those who had lost their employment as a result of Covid. The scheme closed to new applications on 8 July 2021.

Following the announcement of the introduction of a range of public health measures with effect from Tuesday 7 December 2021 to help to reduce the spread of Covid-19, the Government has decided to reopen for a limited period the PUP to support people who lose employment arising from the new restrictions.

These measures will have a particular impact on sectors such as hospitality, the night-time economy, and the arts and entertainment sectors.

A self-employed person whose income from self-employment ceased or reduced since 7

December 2021 due to the introduction of the public health restrictions announced on that date is eligible to receive the PUP. This includes musicians.

The person concerned was in receipt of the Part-Time Job Incentive Scheme for the Self-Employed (PTSE). The scheme is available to self-employed people who were in receipt of the PUP or a Jobseeker's payment in the week immediately prior to their application and are returning to or increasing their self-employment for up to a maximum of 24 hours per week. The person concerned re-applied for the PUP following the introduction of public health measures from 7 December 2021 and the resulting impact on their self-employment. Their application has been processed and awarded. However, as the person had failed to take steps to close their existing claim for PTSE, this stopped their PUP claim and a communication issued to the customer advising them of that. The matter has now been addressed and I am pleased to inform the Deputy that payment of the PUP has issued to the person.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Payments

449. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will address a matter in relation to a disability welfare payment (details supplied). [61694/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Disability Allowance is one of a range of means-tested social assistance payments operated by my Department. Social welfare legislation provides that the means test takes account of the income and assets of the person (and spouse / partner, if applicable), applying for the relevant scheme.

The means assessment reflects the fact that there is an expectation that people with reasonable amounts of income or capital are in a position to use these resources to support themselves so that social welfare expenditure can be directed towards those who need it most. Where an individual is renting part of their family home, the cash value of the rental income is assessed. However, such rental income is reduced by a range of deductions.

These include:

- a proportion of any mortgage interest paid by the claimant on the part of the property rented;

- a 15% deduction for voids (i.e. periods when the accommodation is vacant between lettings); and,

- if the rooms let are furnished, a 5% deduction for wear and tear.

The Deputy will be aware that I have made significant changes to means tests over the last two Budgets. I will continue to keep the issue of means assessments under review, including the issue raised by the Deputy, and will bring forward any further changes in the context of future Budgets.

Flexible Work Practices

450. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will provide a schedule of remote working options available for officials of her Department. [61702/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Civil Service departments and offices have been working in line with Government Covid-19 guidance, which provides for home working to continue where possible. As an essential service, staff in my Department have continued, throughout the pandemic, to work both on site in office premises and remotely to deliver for our customers across our nationwide network of offices.

The number of staff who are working remotely at any one time across all business areas of the Department is approximately 3,300 or 50% of the total staffing number and has remained relatively constant through the Covid-19 restrictions. Overall, since the onset of Covid-19, the range of working options have been full-time remote working, full-time office attendance and blended working i.e. a mixture of home and office working.

The Government has confirmed its support of blended working in the Civil Service and, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is developing an overarching central framework to support consistency of implementation of blended working across the Civil Service.

This framework will inform the development of organisation-level blended working policies tailored to the specific requirements of each Department/Office, whilst ensuring a consistency of approach across key policy areas. In conjunction with this framework an application process is also currently being developed to allow staff to apply for blended working into the future.

In line with this approach, it is intended, subject to business needs and individual suitability, to make blended working part of the way that my Department will work on a more permanent basis, continuing to offer remote working, blended working and office-based working options.

To this end, my Department will develop a blended working policy based on the framework being developed by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and will aim to implement this policy in the first quarter of 2022, subject to prevailing public health guidance.

Flexible Work Practices

451. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection the way in which some and or all staff of her Department remote into their online systems; and if on-site laptops and or desktop computers are required to be powered on at all times to facilitate remote working. [61703/21]

453. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason electricity costs incurred by her Department in 2020 were higher than other years in view of the fact that officials were required to work remotely. [61705/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 451 and 453 together.

Electricity costs in my Department were higher in 2020 because of the impact of Covid 19 on work practices and adherence to public health guidance. Compared with other Government Departments, the Department of Social Protection has required on site attendance of an average of 50% of staff and has provided access to all public offices, including the network of Intreo Offices across the country.

Increased energy costs during 2020 can be accounted for by:

- The cost of electricity and gas increased in the period 2019-2021.

- The use of four additional buildings to facilitate temporary staff recruited to manage the

unprecedented administrative demand of processing the Pandemic Unemployment Payment. Given the requirements for social distancing and attendance levels in existing buildings, this additional accommodation was necessary.

- in order to facilitate social distancing, some offices of the Department operated shift attendance and weekend attendance and buildings required to be heated, lit and ventilated for longer periods.

- The ventilation systems were operated for extended periods in all buildings in accordance with public health advice.

- Although 50% of staff have worked largely off site since the commencement of the pandemic, the utility costs of office occupation were largely fixed, with staff distributed throughout buildings to maintain social distancing.

- Despite the fact that on average 50% of staff worked on site, remote access was required to facilitate the remaining staff working offsite in the majority of cases. For security and other reasons, a remote access protocol was used which required desktop PCs to be maintained in a powered on position (remote PCs were simply used as a screen rather than having access to data and systems directly).

During 2020 almost two-thirds of staff who were working from home were remotely accessing PCs which had to remain switched on in the office; this was approximately 1,800 PCs. Since then the Department has been rolling out secure laptops to staff to eliminate this requirement and currently about 250 staff are remotely accessing office PCs.

The target of reduction in energy usage for the public sector over the period 2009-2020 was set at 33% and, notwithstanding the increase in usage last year, this Department has exceeded this target, achieving an overall 42% saving in energy usage.

In June 2021, my Department was awarded ISO Certification in energy management and is the first Government Department to achieve this standard. My Department will continue to prioritise energy management within an overall framework of our initiatives for a Greener Department and to implement the actions in this regard in the recently published Climate Action Plan.

Cybersecurity Policy

452. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she is satisfied that all ICT systems and databases and payment software are fully secure from a breach perspective. [61704/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department implements a security-by-design and defence-in-depth approach to cyber security. My Department also has 24/7 cyber defensive systems in place which react to any threat to its systems in the event of a cyber incident or security breach. All systems are monitored on a 24/7 basis. My Department also works closely with the National Cyber Security Centre and the Office of the Government CIO to ensure that best practice principles are followed regarding cyber security.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Question No. 453 answered with Question No. 451.

Social Welfare Schemes

454. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the short-term illness benefit will be extended to the self-employed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61845/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): There is a wide range of benefits available to people who make Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI) contributions. Entitlement to such benefits is dependent on the individual's social insurance contribution record, the class of social insurance paid as well as satisfying other qualification criteria relevant to the scheme being applied for.

In general, self-employed people make PRSI contributions at class S. Where all qualification criteria for the particular scheme are satisfied, this class of PRSI gives access to the following benefits -

- Adoptive Benefit,

- Guardian's Payment (Contributory),

- Invalidity Pension,

- Jobseeker's Benefit (Self-Employed),

- Maternity Benefit,

- Parent's Benefit,

- Partial Capacity Benefit (where in receipt of Invalidity Pension),

- Paternity Benefit,

- State Pension (Contributory),

- Treatment Benefit, and

- Widows, Widower's or Surviving Civil Partner's (Contributory) Pension.

The benefits to which class S PRSI does not provide access are -

- Carer's Benefit,

- Health and Safety Benefit,

- Illness Benefit, and

- Occupational Injuries Benefits.

Although self-employed people are not usually eligible for Illness Benefit, an exception was made in relation to Covid-19, primarily as a public health measure. The purpose of the enhanced Illness Benefit payment in respect of Covid-19 is to encourage people to not go to work due to financial constraint when they should be in isolation. It has been available to the self-employed since its introduction in March 2020. Expenditure on the enhanced Illness Benefit is expected to be in the region of €100 million for 2021.

There has been an extensive expansion of access to the range of social insurance benefits for self-employed social insurance contributors in recent years without any increase in the 4% rate of contribution made by them. In effect, self-employed contributors, in return for a contribution of 11 percentage points lower than the combined employer and employee contribution of 15.05% made in respect of employed contributors, have access to benefits which comprise over

90% of the value of all benefits available to employed contributors.

The Programme for Government commits to giving consideration to increasing all classes of PRSI over time to replenish the Social Insurance Fund to help pay for measures and changes to be agreed including to the State pension system, improvements in short-term sick pay benefits, parental leave benefits, pay-related jobseeker's benefit and treatment benefits.

The supplementary welfare allowance (SWA) scheme is the safety net within the overall social welfare system in that it provides assistance to eligible people in the State whose means are insufficient to meet their needs and those of their dependants. Supports provided under the SWA scheme can consist of a basic weekly payment, a weekly or monthly supplement in respect of certain expenses, as well as single exceptional needs payments (ENPs) and urgent needs payments (UNPs). The basic supplementary welfare allowance provides immediate assistance for those in need who are awaiting the outcome of a claim or an appeal for a primary social welfare payment or do not qualify for payment under other State schemes.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Appeals

455. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Social Protection when it is expected that a decision will issue on a review in relation to a working family payment for a person (details supplied). [61851/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Working Family Payment (WFP) formerly Family Income Supplement is a weekly in-work support, which provides an income top-up for employees on low earnings with children. To qualify for Working Family Payment the customer must have at least 1 qualified child who normally resides with them.

WFP is payable at 60% of the difference between the set income limit for a given family size and the weekly family income. There are set income limits for each family size. It is reassessed on an annual basis. WFP for the person concerned expired on 6 October 2021.

They had reapplied on 27 July 2021and the application was disallowed on the grounds that the weekly family income was higher than the prescribed income level for the family size. A decision letter issued on 03 September 2021 giving the right of review and appeal.

A review of this decision was requested on 06 December 2021. There was no change to the original decision as the household income for the person concerned still exceeded the limit. A letter confirming this issued to the person concerned on 8th December.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Insurance

456. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will provide a detailed reply to a PRSI query (details supplied). [61961/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Remittance of social insurance contributions by self-employed people fall into either of two broad categories. The first category are those who exercise a trade or profession and who are obliged to file annual returns of income under the Revenue self-assessment process through which any social insur-

ance liabilities arising are collected in a single, annual sum. The second category are company directors who utilise the PAYE system to remit the social insurance contributions due from their emoluments. It has been confirmed with the Deputy's office that clarification relating to this latter category is what is required.

As company directors are paid through the PAYE system they are required to discharge the appropriate social insurance liability, along with the relevant tax and USC liabilities as prescribed by Revenue. The employee social insurance contribution rate of 4% must be deducted and Class S returned.

Recognising that company directors may not draw emoluments in every week of the contribution year, my Department reviews the number of Class S contributions and the charges remitted on PAYE, if less than 52 weekly contributions have been returned on payroll. This is done to ensure that in all circumstances where emoluments reach the €5,000 social insurance contribution liability threshold, even when returned over a portion of the year, and the liability is discharged in full, the company director will be assigned 52 Class S contributions. This ensures consistency with the contributions assigned to those who file annual returns under the self-assessment process.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Pension Provisions

457. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will examine the case of a person (details supplied) in relation to a supplementary pension. [61968/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The information requested by the Deputy relates to the payment of a public sector pension to a retired nurse and, therefore, it is not a matter for which my Department has responsibility.

The payment of pension related benefits to former public sector employees is a matter for the relevant line Department, in this case, the Department of Health, with matters relating to pensions policy in respect of public sector employees falling within the remit of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

458. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection further to Parliamentary Question No. 429 of 23 November 2021, if her attention has been drawn to delays in processing Covid-19 enhanced illness benefit applications in recent weeks; the processes her Department is putting in place to ensure those who contract Covid-19 or are close contacts and cannot go to work can avail of the scheme immediately; the average waiting time from application to approval for Covid-19 enhanced illness benefit for November and December 2021 in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61988/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Covid Illness Benefit (Enhanced Illness Benefit) is a scheme that was introduced in March 2020, to support people who are incapable of work or who are required to self-isolate, as a result of a Covid diagnosis or being a probable source of infection. To date a total of 217,313 Covid Illness Benefit related claims have been processed.

The majority of the standard Illness Benefit claims are automatically processed once medi-

cal evidence has been received from the customer; where an application is received and an e-Cert is submitted by a GP.

Over the past four weeks an average of some 8,000 Covid Illness Benefit applications have been received weekly with approximately 15,100 received since the beginning of December. The medical evidence provided for the majority of these claims is a text from the HSE advising the person to self-isolate or that they have a Covid diagnosis. All of these claims require manual officer intervention to verify that the medical evidence provided by the customer is valid for payment.

Claims made between 29 November and 05 December, where medical evidence has been provided, are currently being processed. My Department has take a number of measures to reduce processing times including the temporary redeployment of staff from across the Department and system changes to increase automation within the process. It is expected that these measures will improve these timelines over the coming weeks.

It is not possible to differentiate between Illness Benefit and Enhanced Illness Benefit in claim processing statistics. Processing statistics for Illness Benefit for November and December 2021 are set out in the table below; these figures are inclusive of Enhanced Illness Benefit in payment for the month. The figures for December are up to and including the 10th of the month.

A substantial number of claims received do not have appropriate medical evidence which significantly adds to decision delays.

Month	Claims Registered	% awarded within 7 days
November	62,355	73.58%
December	22,758	63.04%

Data Protection

459. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will provide an update on the progress that has been made to date with the Data Protection Commission in the context of narrowing the scope of documents filed in a case (details supplied). [62011/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I am pleased to advise the Deputy that the Data Protection Commission has, under the terms of a settlement agreed with the Department on Friday 10th December 2021, cancelled its enforcement notice. The terms of the agreement have been published in an agreed notice that is available on both the Department's and the DPC's website.

Public Services Card

460. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will provide a schedule of all annual expenditure directly and indirectly associated with the creation, roll out and use of the public services card since its creation. [62012/21]

461. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will provide the methodology used to arrive at the findings contained in the report, The SAFE-PSC-MyGovID Framework for Public Service Identity Management: A Cost-Benefit Analysis (details supplied). [62013/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 460 and 461 together.

On 5th November 2021, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform published a cost-benefit analysis report on the Public Service Identity (PSI) management framework as one of the Autumn Spending Review Papers.

The PSI management framework consists of the SAFE registration service, the Public Services Card (PSC) and the MyGovID service.

The report was prepared as a Spending Review by the Department's Investment Analysis Unit which is part of the Irish Government Statistical Service and it was compiled in compliance with the principles of the Irish Statistical System Code of Practice and the Cost-Benefit Analysis principles laid down in the Public Spending Code.

The methodology used to determine the findings in the Report can be found under Chapter 4 of the Report - "Sources and Methods". In line with international best practice, the Report adapted the principles of the Net Present Value (NPV) method to compare the actual costs and wider quantifiable benefits of the initiative to the costs that would have necessarily been incurred in the counterfactual scenario where the initiative was not undertaken, in order to assess which option has a lower quantifiable net present cost (NPC). This broader analytic approach is sometimes also referred to as a 'Cost-Effectiveness Analysis' (CEA), and the costs and benefits may be split between 'financial' and 'economic' categories.

The report has been peer-reviewed by the Spending Review Steering Group, chaired by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. The report found that:

- as a mature project with annual costs of about €10 million and annual benefits of about €30 million, the framework yields savings of over €20 million every year;

- the investment in this framework paid for itself in less than five years;

- from 2010 to 2019, the total cost of the investment was €98 million but this generated benefits of €218 million over the same period;

- the total savings from the entire project from its inception out to 2030, adjusted for the time value of money is highly positive at over €206 million.

The Report set out expenditure on the PSI management framework from its inception in 2010 to 2019. The attached tabular statement contains updated figures which set out expenditure on the framework from 2010 to November 2021.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy. **Tabular Statement**

Public Service Identity (PSI) management Framework: Summary Expenditure 2010 - November 2021

Year	SAFE ID verification	PSC development, production & issuance	MyGovID development & production	Total costs
	€m	€m	€m	€m
2010	0.11	1.62	-	1.73
2011	1.03	0.18	-	1.21

Year	SAFE ID verification	PSC development, production & issuance	MyGovID development & production	Total costs
	€m	€m	€m	€m
2012	2.92	2.35	-	5.27
2013	5.60	3.36	-	8.96
2014	6.28	6.03	0.36	12.67
2015	7.26	5.02	1.48	13.76
2016	6.80	5.31	1.52	13.64
2017	6.93	4.93	2.25	14.11
2018	7.03	4.42	2.69	14.14
2019	5.75	3.60	2.76	12.11
2020	5.28	2.35	3.11	10.74
2021	4.64	1.96	2.53	9.13
Total	59.64	41.13	16.70	117.47

Question No. 461 answered with Question No. 460.

Covid-19 Tests

462. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth his plans for the provision of antigen tests for the early childhood care and education sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61177/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): My Department is currently working with the HSE to finalise an antigen testing programme for early learning and childcare services.

The antigen testing programme for early learning and childcare services will be similar to the antigen testing programme that has recently been rolled out in primary schools.

Antigen tests will be provided free to children and childcare workers who are in the same group, or pod, of a confirmed case of COVID-19 in an early learning and childcare service.

Information on the antigen test programme is being finalised and will issue to service providers and parents this week.

Covid-19 Pandemic

463. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration

and Youth his plans to update advice to childcare facilities regarding the wearing of face coverings by staff; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61349/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): Updated Interim Guidance on the use of Face Coverings in Childcare and Educational Settings was published by the HSE's Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) on 30 November 2021. In line with this guidance, a notice was issued by my Department on 1 December to the Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) sector, including childminders. The notice confirms that at this point in time there is no change in the public health guidance on adults wearing masks in ELC/SAC settings: staff members, parents and visitors should all wear face masks/coverings when not caring for children and where social distancing is not possible.

As per guidance from the HPSC, the wearing of face coverings in ELC and SAC services is recommended for adults when it is not possible to keep a 2m distance from other adults. Staff are also advised to wear a face covering when in close proximity to children if doing so does not pose a barrier to early learning and care. HPSC guidance specifically notes that it is expected that use of face coverings will generally be practical when attending to school-age children. This aligns with the approach in schools.

It is acknowledged that some staff may feel safer wearing a mask at all times, especially at a time of high levels of infection in the community.

My Department is keeping public health guidance, including on wearing of face coverings, under review with the HSE and will provide updates as required.

Rights of People with Disabilities

464. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he plans to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61432/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): Ireland ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in March 2018 but has yet to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention. The Optional Protocol is an international treaty that establishes two procedures aimed at strengthening the implementation and monitoring of the Convention. The first is an individual communications procedure allowing individuals to bring petitions to the Committee claiming breaches of their rights; the second is an inquiry procedure giving the Committee authority to undertake inquiries of grave or systematic violations of the Convention.

The Programme for Government reiterates the commitment to ratify the Optional Protocol after the first reporting cycle under the UNCRPD. Having regard to possible delays at UN Committee level, both I and my colleague, Minister Rabbitte, are open to an earlier ratification of the Optional Protocol.

Our intention is to prepare for ratification of the Optional Protocol once the state is in a position to meet its obligations thereunder. This is in line with Ireland's position of acting in good faith on the international stage.

Commencement of the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015, and full operationalisation of the Decision Support Service will be a key requirement in this regard. This is scheduled to take place in June and July of next year respectively, following the passage of the

Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Bill, which is currently being drafted.

In addition, a detailed review process is needed to ensure that Ireland's legislative provisions and redress mechanisms are sufficient to meet the obligations that will arise once Ireland ratifies the Optional Protocol. My Department is working on this process now and will engage with other Departments and organisations in this regard, with a view to identifying and addressing any further requirements for ratification.

Government is committed to ratification at the earliest possible date.

Legislative Process

465. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the status of the Disability (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2016; the articles that have been commenced and not commenced, respectively; when he expects the entirety of the Bill to be commenced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61615/21]

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

The Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Bill is being used to advance a number of legislative provisions required by the UNCRPD that were previously included in the Disability (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2016. These include measures to double the percentage of people with disabilities to be employed by public bodies from 3% to 6% by 2024, and also legislating for the position of IHREC as the national monitoring body under the Convention.

Work is actively taking place on the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Bill, which is currently being drafted by the Office of Parliamentary Counsel. It is intended that the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 would be amended and fully commenced by June 2022.

Direct Provision System

466. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of adults and children remaining in direct provision centres after their leave to remain has been granted for the most recent date available. [61671/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I can inform the Deputy that the number of adults and children remaining in direct provision centres after their leave to remain has been granted is 1,640 persons as of the end of November.

Domestic Violence

467. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of adults and children who accessed Tusla-funded domestic violence refuge accommodation to date in 2021; the average length of time families spent in such accommodation; and the number of beds available on a given night in 2021. [61672/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

Departmental Schemes

468. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the way the mother and baby home scheme works for those who are uncertain in relation to the date on which they were adopted. [61755/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The Mother and Baby Institutions Payment Scheme will include financial payments and a form of enhanced medical card. Payments will be provided to eligible applicants based on residency in one of the institutions for a defined period of time.

While the residency details in respect of application to the Scheme will have to be looked at individually, it is anticipated that relevant dates to establish eligibility for the Scheme will be the date the child was born in or admitted to the Mother and Baby or County Home Institution and the date they physically left this institution. It is envisaged that the Executive Office will endeavour to assist applicants in accessing records for the purpose of making applications to the Scheme.

Weather Events

469. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the reason his Department advised all early learning and care and school aged childcare services to close on 7 and 8 December 2021; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that many parents were unhappy regarding this advice given that Storm Barra turned out not to be very dangerous particularly in the Dublin area; if he will reconsider the policy for the sector in respect of orange weather warnings given that such storms are likely to be more frequent in the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61852/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): Early learning and childcare services located in counties with red and orange weather warnings were advised by my Department to close on 7 and 8 December.

On 6 December Met Eireann issued a red alert warning relating to severe wind for counties Clare, Kerry and Cork. A status orange warning issued for counties Limerick, Waterford, Galway, Mayo, Wexford, Dublin, Louth, Wicklow, Meath.

Met Éireann also advised that there was a strong possibility that the status of parts of the counties in status orange were likely to change and escalate to status red. On foot of this advice and engagement with the Department of Education, a decision was taken to advise services in affected areas to remain closed on Tuesday, 7 December to ensure that children, parents and staff remained safe.

Included in this communication on 6 December was confirmation that services that closed due to Storm Barra would continue to receive State subvention under the Force Majeure clause in their contracts.

On Tuesday, 7 December, a communication issued advising that early learning and child-

care services in counties with red and orange warnings should remain closed on 8 December.

The advice to early learning and childcare services in counties with red and orange weather warnings to close was not taken lightly. The storm was significant in nature and was emerging and changing course over a three day period. The safety of children and staff in early learning and childcare services was of paramount importance and was the basis of my decision to advice closure of services in affected counties.

With regard to future storms, any advice on service closures will be taken in co-operation with other Departments, taking into account the advice of Met Éireann. The safety of children and staff will be the main consideration in any advice which may be given.

Covid-19 Tests

470. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will reconsider the exclusion of students in private higher education sector from the decision to fund rapid antigen tests for students; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61664/21]

471. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the reason students in institutions (details supplied) are to be excluded from the public health free rapid antigen tests. [61969/21]

484. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on providing an antigen testing scheme to all third-level institutions including the private higher education sector which would allow for all students who wish to avail of tests free at the point of use given the large numbers of students in many of those colleges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61717/21]

490. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if consideration will be given to extending rapid antigen testing to private third-level colleges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61847/21]

491. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the estimated cost of extending rapid antigen testing to private third-level colleges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61848/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 470, 471, 484, 490 and 491 together.

The intention of Government is to strengthen the prevention and intervention measures around COVID-19 in response to the changing context. My Department recognises the potential role of rapid antigen testing as one part of a package of surveillance and vigilance measures including self-monitoring and other public health measures.

Following public health advice to the sector from the Expert Advisory Group on Rapid Testing, advice which is published and available on the Department's website, a once-off fund of €9m to provide rapid antigen testing kits to students in further and higher education has been announced by my Department.

The purpose of the fund is to encourage the use of antigen testing amongst students and will involve:

- Providing funding to institutions via the funding agencies to make a small number of anti-

gen tests available free to students

- Respecting the autonomy and flexibility of institutions in deciding at institutional level how best to provide these tests to students as soon as practicable

- Developing a communications campaign for students to increase the awareness of rapid antigen testing and their appropriate use.

The fund will be made available to further and higher education institutions through SOLAS and HEA, including to the private institutions represented by HECA, with approximately 20,000 students, to ensure that we promote the use of antigen testing amongst young people.

In terms of costs, at this time it is not possible to provide information in relation to allocations that will be paid to individual institutions or bodies at this time as the process to determine and allocate funds is ongoing. It is the intention that the funding allocation for HECA colleges will be aligned with the allocations to publicly funded providers and from within the ring-fenced allocation for antigen testing as part of the Department's 2021 Covid allocation.

In addition to this once-off specific fund, the UniCov study continues in a number of universities.

Question No. 471 answered with Question No. 470.

Covid-19 Tests

472. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if private colleges are entitled to free antigen tests for their students; and if so, the way they can access them. [61166/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The intention of Government is to strengthen the prevention and intervention measures around COVID-19 in response to the changing context. My Department recognises the potential role of rapid antigen testing as one part of a package of surveillance and vigilance measures including self-monitoring and other public health measures.

Following public health advice to the sector from the Expert Advisory Group on Rapid Testing, advice which is published and available on the Department's website, a once-off fund of €9m to provide rapid antigen testing kits to students in further and higher education has been announced by my Department.

The purpose of the fund is to encourage the use of antigen testing amongst students and will involve:

- Providing funding to institutions via the funding agencies to make a small number of antigen tests available free to students

- Respecting the autonomy and flexibility of institutions in deciding at institutional level how best to provide these tests to students as soon as practicable

- Developing a communications campaign for students to increase the awareness of rapid antigen testing and their appropriate use.

The fund will be made available to further and higher education institutions through SOLAS and HEA, including to the private institutions represented by HECA, with approximately 27000

students, to ensure that we promote the use of antigen testing amongst young people.

In addition to this once-off specific fund, the UniCov study continues in a number of universities.

Covid-19 Pandemic

473. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if it is planned to introduce health regulations in relation to the holding of in-person third-level examinations between the end of November and Christmas 2021 in the Technological University of the Shannon, Athlone in view of the risk that the institute might become a super-spreader events and cause Covid-19 to be reintroduced by students returning home for Christmas to households throughout the country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61227/21]

479. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his attention has been drawn to the current situation in multiple colleges across the country in which students have been looking for intervention or support for cancelling in person exams due to fears around Covid-19 and safety precautions in view circulation of packed exam halls; and his plans to deal with the disregard for student safety. [61509/21]

481. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding the health and safety in sitting in exam halls with hundreds of students; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61666/21]

482. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on the suggestion that all exams in third-level institutions that are due to be taking place in December 2021 and early January 2022 not to be in-person exams given the situation with Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61715/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 473, 479, 481 and 482 together.

Education is an essential service and the Government has agreed that it can continue on-site, in line with Safe Return Plan published in June. The Safe Return Plan and the most recent guidance on the current approach advocate and support contingency planning to ensure that institutions remain flexible and adaptable in response to changes in the public health environment.

My Department does not determine sector specific matters at this level. However, in order to address concerns, I met with management, staff and student representatives on the 19th November and the issue was discussed.

Due to the diversity and autonomy of our higher education institutions, and the broad range of activities they undertake and the different contexts and requirements applicable to examinations, it was agreed that a uniform or one size fits all approach would not be appropriate across the whole of higher education or indeed the tertiary sector more generally.

Management bodies confirmed that they are actively looking at a range of approaches to ensure that end of term examinations will be safe, and that the requirements of students who may have Covid-19 or underlying health conditions can be addressed. It was also pointed out that there are some examinations – such as those related to external accreditation - which are

challenging to change to an online format at short notice.

The outcome of the meeting was that Individual higher education institutions will assess the appropriate approach to examinations, taking into account the significant contextual factors that arise in different instances and that individuals who cannot sit exams due to Covid-19 concerns will be offered alternatives.

Since that meeting in November, the sector has confirmed that many institutions have now commenced their end of semester examinations, adopting approaches to their examinations on the basis of risk assessment and the use of precautionary measures as agreed.

In instances where examinations are being held in person, institutions are ensuring that these are taking place in environments in line with public health guidance and at a significantly lower capacity than normal. Procedures are in place to accommodate students who cannot sit an exam as a result of Covid impacting either themselves or close contacts.

The sector continues to carefully consider the balance between the measures, the risk assessments and to engage with staff and students in planning for examinations.

In all instances public health must remain a priority and I know that there will be a continuing focus on the evolving and often quickly changing public health situation overall. I have also recently announced a €9 million fund to enable institutions provide free antigen tests to students. The use of these tests can provide an additional layer of protection, to prevent onward transmission and help to protect students, our third level sector and the community at large.

National Training Fund

474. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the estimated projected yield from a 0.2% increase in 2022 in the national training fund levy. [61276/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The National Training Fund (NTF) Act, 2000 provides for a levy on employers to be used to fund the development of and raising of skills amongst those in, or seeking, employment.

The 2022 estimate for NTF income from PRSI receipts is €851.2 million. This estimate is based on a rate of 1% of reckonable earnings in 2022 and forecasted by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection at Budget 2022. On the basis of this estimate, an increase of 0.2% in the rate of contributions would generate €156 million in a full year.

Year	NTF Levy Rate	NTF Levy Income Actuals	NTF Levy Income Forecast	Projected Yield for a 0.2% increase in NTF levy
2022	1%	Not yet available	€851m	€156m

It should be noted that the last increase to the national training fund levy was 0.1% in 2020 which resulted in an increase to the 2020 NTF spending limit of €74m. An increase to the levy is not being contemplated at this time.

Pension Provisions

475. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the status of a pension review in the case of a person (details supplied); if he will provide clarity on this matter; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that there has been no update provided since 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61296/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Officials have engaged with the Higher Education Institution in question with a view to bringing this matter to a conclusion and I understand that the Higher Education Institution will be in communication with the individual in due course.

Youth Services

476. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the way in which the youthreach programme operates within Kerry ETB; if the youthreach programme ran in partnership with other services within the county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61318/21]

477. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the reason the Youthreach programme is no longer available for learners in Cahersiveen and Killorglin, County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61319/21]

478. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the position in relation to the staff that were employed in the Youthreach programmes in Cahersiveen and Killorglin, County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61320/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): I propose to take Questions Nos. 476 to 478, inclusive, together.

I understand from enquiries made by my officials with Kerry Education and Training Board (KETB) that its Youthreach Programme, which had been provided by a third party under a Service Level Agreement until 31st December 2018, was brought into the Board's directly provided services from 1st January 2019 with the relevant staff transferred to KETB by way of a TUPE (Transfer of Undertaking, Protection for Employment) process.

Following the reduction in eligible enrolments on the Youthreach Programme in Cahersiveen to two learners in September, 2020, KETB established a Working Group to determine whether a need exists in the Iveragh area for a Youthreach programme to accommodate young people who are no longer engaged in full-time education. The work of this group is ongoing and KETB has assured my officials that the necessary provision will be made available if a further need is identified.

All staff previously assigned to the Youthreach under the South Kerry VTOS/Youthreach Programme, which operated in the Caherciveen and Killorglin area, are fully employed for their contracted hours by KETB in the provision of further education and training courses in the area.

Question No. 477 answered with Question No. 476.

Question No. 478 answered with Question No. 476.

Question No. 479 answered with Question No. 473.

Covid-19 Tests

480. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans to include students in private education colleges in the free antigen testing programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61535/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The intention of Government is to strengthen the prevention and intervention measures around COVID-19 in response to the changing context. My Department recognises the potential role of rapid antigen testing as one part of a package of surveillance and vigilance measures including self-monitoring and other public health measures.

Following public health advice to the sector from the Expert Advisory Group on Rapid Testing, advice which is published and available on the Department's website, a once-off fund of €9m to provide rapid antigen testing kits to students in further and higher education has been announced by my Department.

The purpose of the fund is to encourage the use of antigen testing amongst students and will involve:

- Providing funding to institutions via the funding agencies to make a small number of antigen tests available free to students

- Respecting the autonomy and flexibility of institutions in deciding at institutional level how best to provide these tests to students as soon as practicable

- Developing a communications campaign for students to increase the awareness of rapid antigen testing and their appropriate use.

The fund will be made available to further and higher education institutions through SOLAS and HEA, including to the private institutions represented by HECA, with approximately 27000 students, to ensure that we promote the use of antigen testing amongst young people.

In addition to this once-off specific fund, the UniCov study continues in a number of universities.

Question No. 481 answered with Question No. 473.

Question No. 482 answered with Question No. 473.

Third Level Fees

483. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science further to Parliamentary Question No. 142 of 1 December 2021, if he will consider introducing measures such as regulations or legislation that would prevent third-level institutions from passing on debts arising from unpaid fees to debt collectors; his views on the suggestion of a ban on preventing students graduating due to debts arising from fees; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61716/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The regulation of debt collection is not within the remit of my Depart-

ment. Debt collection in Ireland is regulated by the Consumer Credit Act 1995, as well as the European Communities (Consumer Credit Agreements) Regulations 2010. The Consumer Credit Act is under the purview of the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, and any amendments or further regulations in relation to this act would be a matter for that Minister and his Department.

I would not be in favour of debt collectors chasing students for unpaid debts, and would hope that higher education institutions would show flexibility and engage with students facing financial hardship to reach an amicable solution. However higher education institutions are autonomous bodies under the *Universities Act 1997,* the *Institutes of Technology Acts 1992 to 2006* and the *Technological Universities Act 2018.* They are entitled to regulate their own administrative affairs, including in relation to their finances and the conferring of degrees.

Question No. 484 answered with Question No. 470.

Research Funding

485. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the State funding provided to the Tyndall Institute since 2011 either through direct exchequer funding, competitive SFI funding or another source; if there is a commitment to increase Exchequer funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61829/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Tyndall National Institute was established in 2004 as a partnership between Government and University College Cork, to provide a national focal point for excellence in deep-tech research, development and graduate training in ICT.

As a key national Institute, Tyndall works through world-class teams performing groundbreaking research on new materials, devices and systems with an 'economic impact through research excellence' philosophy, focusing on the delivery of value from research to the Irish economy. Tyndall sits in a unique position in Ireland (and internationally) at the mid-point between traditional HEI research activities and the demanding industry interface, and over many years through an industry-experienced commercial team, Tyndall has built the required credibility and trust with industry partners which is critical to successful engagements.

Tyndall is a national leader in achieving success within EU funding programmes – and in particular is an acknowledged key player in Europe within the Horizon 2020 ICT programme. It is involved in projects with a value of €782m, with €62m coming to Tyndall, and €53m to other Irish partners.

Tyndall's research excellence and impact has been acknowledged through prestigious international awards from ERC, Royal Society, IEEE, IoP, and EARTO and also through a number of its staff being appointed as Fellows of the IEEE.

Tyndall is also a national leader in the commercialisation of its technology output and in that regard has generated license income, unrivalled in the sector, from key consumer product manufacturers in recent years. It also commercialises its research through the creation of new spin-off and start-up companies, and Tyndall's technology has been instrumental in the establishment of 22 such companies to date.

A significant multi-year Tyndall core underpinning equipment upgrade is currently underway, with €26m committed to date through a combination of direct Exchequer funding and

competitively won infrastructure funding from SFI.

I am pleased to support Tyndall and I have committed to increase Tyndall's annual funding to €10 million by 2024.

The Government have fully supported the Tyndall ambition to double in size in the coming years. This expresses strong confidence in Tyndall's ability to continue to deliver for Ireland on the international stage. It will also allow Tyndall/UCC to draw down the enabling €75m EIB loan to fund the project, and importantly also ensure the project timeline can be maintained in order to deliver the new facility by the end of 2024.

This will result in a national research facility of international scale, which will become a magnet for international research talent and will substantially assist the Governments FDI agenda with consequent significant economic impact.

Related to the Tyndall expansion, in May 2021, I launched what will be an important activity within the expanded Institute – Ireland's first Quantum Computer Engineering Centre (QCEC) at Tyndall, which will ultimately lead to the creation and retention of high-quality sustainable ICT jobs.

The State funding provided to the Tyndall Institute since 2011 either through direct exchequer funding, competitive SFI funding or another source is as follows:

- Direct funding to the Tyndall Institute from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science: €44.8 m

- Direct funding to the Tyndall Institute from Science Foundation Ireland: €133.5m

- Direct funding to the Tyndall Institute from the Department of the Environment Climate and Communications: €8.1m

- Direct funding to the Tyndall Institute from Enterprise Ireland R&I programmes: €45.0m

While the Irish Research Council have awardees based at the Tyndall Institute, and indeed in other research institutes in UCC, they don't provide funding to the Tyndall Institute directly but instead provide it to UCC, which is responsible for hosting these awards.

Third Level Staff

486. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of academic and research staff employed by the Tyndall Institute; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61830/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I am informed by University College Cork (UCC) that the Tyndall National Institute is a focal point for excellence in deep-tech research, development and graduate training in ICT. As a National Institute that sits in a unique position in Ireland (and internationally) at the mid-point between traditional HEI research activities and the demanding industry interface it is different from a normal academic unit in that its primary focus is not the teaching of undergraduate students but is the development of world class research through the training of postgraduate students for industry and the development of career researchers.

UCC state that the Tyndall National Institute is home to a Research eco-system of 650+ staff, students, academic and industry collaborators. The core research and support staff complement

is 477 including 8 Academic/Research Professors. This includes 136 primarily PhD students who are regarded as a critical part of the core research community. Tyndall is also host to approx 30 academic members and researchers from UCC and MTU. In addition Tyndall hosts 100 industry researchers and almost 50 academic visitors and visiting students/interns from a wide range of Irish and international collaborating partners.

Departmental Funding

487. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science further to Parliamentary Question No. 139 of 24 November 2021 and in view of the fact the projected cost range of this project in the NDP is €100 to €250 million, if the project is projected to cost a total of €75 million (details supplied); the other sources of funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61831/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I should first explain this project is managed by the Tyndall National Institute/UCC in the first instance. I understand that the EIB loan of €75m for a new building, together with other investments competitively won through SFI and others such as philanthropy, borrowings and own resources, equates to a total investment package in excess of €100m over the lifetime of the NDP 2018 to 2027.

Departmental Funding

488. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the level of direct Exchequer funding that is being provided to deliver the upgrading of the Royal Irish Academy of Music redevelopment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61832/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Co-Funding of €6.8m from my Department with an additional €3m from the Department of Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media has been approved for the redevelopment of the Royal Irish Academy of Music's (RIAM) premises at Westland Row. The balance of funding will be supplied by RIAM largely through philanthropy and their own resources.

The redevelopment will facilitate the Academy in expanding its capacity at undergraduate and postgraduate level, including a projected additional 108 full-time students and 1,291 part-time students.

Departmental Funding

489. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the level of direct Exchequer funding that is being provided to deliver the upgrading of the E3 Trinity College Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61833/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Funding of €15m has been approved towards a co-funded building for Engineering, Environment and Emerging Technologies (E3) on TCD's main campus.

The new building aims to integrate engineering, technology and the natural sciences in order to strengthen technological innovation and natural capital through world-leading research, education, and entrepreneurship.

Question No. 490 answered with Question No. 470.

Question No. 491 answered with Question No. 470.

Missing Persons

492. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Justice if she will address a matter (details supplied) regarding recommendations being implemented; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61134/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I wish to acknowledge the pain and trauma experienced by all families of missing persons in the State.

As the Deputy will be aware, the national DNA database, which is administered by Forensic Science Ireland (FSI), has been a significant breakthrough in identifying missing and unknown persons in recent years. To encourage more family members to participate in DNA testing, my Department is developing a targeted outreach, in partnership with An Garda Síochána and FSI, to build on the success of National Missing Persons Day.

To support the work of these organisations, it is crucial that they are aware of all unidentified remains (partial and full) within the State, which fall under coronial jurisdiction. In July, Minister Humphreys wrote to each coroner in the State, requesting that they send my Department the number of unidentified human remains within their coronial districts. These results will be collated by my officials and will be shared with the Missing Persons Unit of the Garda National Protective Services Bureau.

In order to keep this data up-to-date, from 2022 onwards, coroners will be asked to include details of any unidentified human remains reported to them in the preceding year, as part of their statutory annual returns to the Minister for Justice.

In July, a forum was established by my Department with An Garda Síochána's Missing Persons Unit, and with FSI, in order to maintain regular communication and information exchange on these very important matters.

I was pleased to participate in this year's virtual National Missing Persons Day event on 1 December along with Dr. Ciaran MacLoughlin (as a representative of the Coroners Society of Ireland), relatives of missing people, and other key stakeholders. This event provided an important opportunity to remember those who have gone missing as well as raising awareness of the significant contribution made by DNA testing to the conclusion of a considerable number of missing persons cases over recent years.

Prison Service

493. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if she will provide a definitive timeline for the publication of a report commissioned from (details supplied) regarding certain procurement matters involving a company and the Irish Prison Service in view of the fact that the report had been largely completed in September, 2020 but has yet to be published; and if she will publish this report before the end of 2021. [61156/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I wish to advise the Deputy that the relevant review is expected to be completed in early 2022 and will be given detailed consideration within the Department and by the Irish Prison Service at that stage.

Naturalisation Applications

494. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of an application for naturalisation in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61184/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): An application for a certificate of naturalisation was received from the person referred to by the Deputy on 12 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.

I recognise the crucial role healthcare workers are continuing to play in responding to the threat of COVID-19. They work in a challenging environment and deal with vulnerable people on a daily basis. Their exceptional commitment has been particularly clear throughout the pandemic, during which they have played a vital part in preventing the spread of COVID-19.?

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 unfortunately 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.

Cybersecurity Policy

495. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice the measures in place to ensure that justice systems including those of An Garda Síochána and the Courts are protected from cyberattacks; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61202/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): My Department and Agencies take their responsibilities seriously with regard to cyber security and use technologies and procedures to secure their networks. For reasons of operational and national security it would not be appropriate to disclose details of my Department's cyber security arrangements, or those of State offices, agencies and bodies under my remit.

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

Naturalisation Applications

496. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Justice the status of an application by a person (details supplied) given the person has been living in Ireland for almost 11 years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61212/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): In response to a notification pursuant to the provisions of Section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), written representations have been submitted on behalf of the persons concerned. These representations, together with all other information and documentation on file, is currently being considered under Section 3 (6) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended) and all other applicable legislation, in advance of a final decision being made.

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

Naturalisation Applications

497. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Justice the status of an application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61213/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): For reasons of maintaining full confidentiality, it is not my Department's practice to comment on whether an application for asylum or subsidiary protection has been made in the State. An applicant for such protection status, or their legal representative, should contact either the International Protection Office (IPO) or the International Protection Appeals Tribunal (IPAT) directly, as appropriate.

The IPO may be contacted: by email to info@ipo.gov.ie; by telephone to the IPO Customer Service Centre at 01 6028008 or in writing to Customer Service Centre, International Protection

Office, 79-83 Lower Mount Street, Dublin 2.

The IPAT may be contacted either: by email to info@protectionappeals.ie; by telephone at 01-4748400 (or Lo-Call 1890 201 458), or in writing to Corporate Services Division, The International Protection Appeals Tribunal, 6-7 Hanover Street East, Dublin D02 W320.

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

Coroners Service

498. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice the steps she is taking to address the backlogs in the Cork City Coroner's Court; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61239/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Coroners Service is a network of coroners located in districts throughout the country. Coroners are quasi-judicial officers and are independent in the conduct of their functions. Neither I nor my Department has any role in the directing the work of the coroner.

My Department does, however, actively support coroners in the carrying out of their very important service to the public. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, inquests have been severely curtailed in line with public health guidelines. I understand that the coroners are holding, what are referred to as 'documentary inquests' or remote inquests, which require very small numbers of attendees and take place with the agreement of families. Larger inquests, requiring multiple witnesses, are being rescheduled to a later date. All coroners are focused on working through the delays caused to inquests by the pandemic.

In order to assist the Coroner for Cork City district, my Department made contact with the Courts Service and have secured additional courtroom space for the coroner in December 2021 and January 2022. The coroner will liaise directly with the Courts Service with a view to the scheduling of inquests.

Departmental Data

499. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Justice the titles of the studies referred to on the website of her Department in which it is it suggested that there could be up to 17,000 undocumented persons resident in the State; the location in which such studies can be accessed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61256/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): There is no official data on the number of undocumented people in the State, as such people tend to avoid official notice. The Migrant Rights Centre of Ireland has previously estimated that there are some 15,000 to 17,000 undocumented people in the State including 2,000 to 3,000 children. These are estimates and not official statistics.

There are a variety of reasons as to why people become undocumented and therefore the number of undocumented people in the State will fluctuate over time.

When I brought my proposals to Government I made it clear that there was no way of establishing how many people will benefit from the scheme and no firm data existed to help on that point.

Notwithstanding that, I am happy to say that the Government approved my proposal for a once-in-a-generation scheme to regularise thousands of undocumented migrants and their families who are living in Ireland. We are demonstrating the same goodwill and generosity of spirit that we ask is shown to the countless Irish people who left this island to build their lives elsewhere.

The Government's decision will bring some much-needed certainty and peace of mind about their right to live and work in Ireland to thousands of people who are already living here and making a valuable contribution to our society and the economy, many of whom may be very vulnerable due to their current immigration circumstances.

The time-limited scheme will open for online applications in January 2022 and applications will be accepted for six months. Further details regarding the qualifying criteria and the opening date for the scheme will be published on my Department's Irish Immigration website (www.irishimmigration.ie) in due course.

Visa Applications

500. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice when a visa will issue in the case of a person (details supplied); if the visa can be expedited given all is in order to proceed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61271/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The person referred to by the Deputy created an online employment visa application on 7 November 2021. The supporting documentation and fees were received on 17 November 2021 in the New Delhi Visa Office. Their application was examined in detail and a decision was made to refuse their visa on 25 November 2021. The reasons for the refusal are outlined in the refusal letter.

It is open to the applicant to appeal this decision. To date, no appeal of this decision has been received by the Visa Office. An appeal must be submitted within two months of the date on the letter of refusal and can be submitted by post only.

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

An Garda Síochána

501. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of new unmarked Garda cars and vans that were assigned to Garda National Immigration Bureau in 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and the number of these vehicles that were withdrawn from the Bureau during the same period. [61281/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, under the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the administration and

management of An Garda Síochána, including the purchase and distribution of Garda resources such as Garda vehicles. As Minister for Justice, I have no direct role in these matters.

I am advised however, that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review to ensure their optimum use in light of identified operational needs and emerging crime trends.

Budget 2022 provides over €2 billion in funding to An Garda Síochána. Very significant capital investment is being made in An Garda Síochána, including the provision for a capital budget of €147 million for An Garda Síochána's ICT and Building Programme and ongoing investment in the organisation's transport fleet. An Garda Síochána, recognising the need to be visible and accessible in communities but also conscious of taking proactive actions to reduce their carbon footprint, will purchase an additional 100 mountain bikes and increased numbers of electrical vehicles as part of an overall fleet management strategy.

I am informed that 5 unmarked cars were allocated to the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB) in 2020 and 3 unmarked cars to date in 2021. I am further informed that no unmarked vehicles have been removed from GNIB fleet in 2020 or to date in 2021.

An Garda Síochána

502. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of gardaí who successfully completed the advanced motorcycle course in 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and the duration of this course. [61282/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, under the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, including Garda training matters. I, as Minister, have no role in such matters.

I have been provided with the figures in the table below by the Garda authorities, which outlines the number of Gardaí who completed the advanced motorcycle course in 2020 and to date in 2021. I have also included the pre-pandemic figure for 2019 for the Deputy's information. I am informed by the Garda authorities that the course is ten days in duration.

Year	Advanced Motorcycle Course
2019	30
2020	Nil
2021 to date	7

An Garda Síochána

503. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if there are plans to have high powered unmarked vehicles attached to Garda armed support unit fleet. [61283/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, under Section 26 of the Garda Síochána Act 2005 (as amended) the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and administration of Garda business. This includes the allocation of resources to the various Garda divisions/specialised units. As Minister I play no role in this independent function. Further, under the Act, the Garda Commissioner is the Accounting Officer for An Garda Síochána and is responsible for the appropriations accounts of the Garda Síochána.

I have contacted the Garda authorities and have been advised of the following information in order to answer the Deputy's query.Currently there are no plans to purchase unmarked vehicles for the Garda armed support unit. No high-powered unmarked vehicles have been allocated to the Garda armed support unit in 2021.

The purchase and allocation of vehicles is made on the basis of identified operational demands, the availability of resources and is reviewed on a continual basis.

Road Traffic Offences

504. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of drink driving offences recorded in the Kildare division in 2020 and to date in 2021; and the number of drug driving offences excluding alcohol offences over the same period. [61284/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, under the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Garda Commissioner is responsible by law for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, including the enforcement of road traffic legislation. As Minister for Justice, I have no direct role in these matters.

The following table, furnished to me by the Garda authorities, provides a yearly breakdown of the number of incidents of drink and drug driving offences that occurred in the Kildare Division in 2020 and to date in 2021.

	2020	2021*
Drink-Driving	180	207
Drug-Driving	180	238

** Figures for 2021 up to 30 November 2021*

I am advised that the 2021 figures are based on incidents which occurred from 1 January 2021 to 30 November 2021, inclusive. I am further advised that these figures are based upon operational data from the Garda PULSE system as was available on 1 December 2021, and is liable to change.

An Garda Síochána

505. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of gardaí within DMR north Garda division that successfully completed the competency-based driving levels 3 and 4 course in 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [61285/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, under the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, including Garda training matters. I, as Minister, have no role in such matters.

Please find as follows the table provided by Garda authorities that provides the information requested by the Deputy.

Year	CBD3	CBD4
2020	Nil	Nil
2021 to date	2	3

Citizenship Applications

506. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Justice if consideration has been given to granting citizenship for all front-line essential workers, particularly for those currently living in direct provision; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61435/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I recognise and acknowledge the crucial role frontline workers are continuing to play in responding to the threat of COVID-19. They work in a challenging environment and deal with vulnerable people on a daily basis. Their exceptional commitment has been particularly clear throughout the pandemic, during which they have been playing a key role in preventing the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is governed by the provisions of the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956, as amended. All applications for a certificate of naturalisation are processed in line with the eligibility criteria as set out under the Irish Naturalisation and Citizenship Act 1956, as amended. Each application is assessed individually in accordance with the provisions of the Act. A determination on whether an applicant satisfies the statutory criteria attendant to naturalisation can only be made after an application is received.

There are no provisions to apply different criteria depending on the category of employment of the applicant. All applicants are required to meet minimum periods of reckonable residence and standard checks are carried out as part of the overall process to maintain its integrity.

However, my Department is taking a number of steps to speed up the processing of applications.

In January, my Department opened a temporary system to enable these applicants to complete their naturalisation process by signing a statutory declaration of loyalty. Since the introduction of the temporary system, 8,196 citizenship applicants have been contacted and over 7,400 new Irish citizens have received their certificates of naturalisation. My Department has prioritised the oldest applications on hand and a significant number of these applicants have received their certificates since the start of the year.

A number of digitisation measures have 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.

An Garda Síochána

507. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Justice when Garda clearance will issue to a person (details supplied); the average time being taken to issue Garda clearance; the steps being taken to expedite this process; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61512/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda Commissioner is responsible under the law for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, which includes operational matters such as Garda vetting. As Minister, I have no direct role in the matter.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that it is necessary for enhanced vetting and background checks and security vetting to be conducted for persons seeking to join the Army Cadet Corps in the Irish Defence Forces. I am further advised that these checks are conducted by the Garda National Security Vetting Unit, Security and Intelligence Unit in Garda Headquarters, in addition to standard vetting conducted by the Garda National Vetting Bureau. These enquiries are conducted for a multiplicity of reasons.

The Deputy will appreciate that enhanced background checks and security vetting, as a practice, does not lend itself to a duration of an average timeframe for conclusion or closure, but is determined on the basis of information and or intelligence gathered and assessed by An Garda Síochána.

Immigration Policy

508. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if the newly announced regularisation scheme for undocumented migrants is open to undocumented migrants who have Irish children. [61551/21]

509. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the length of time the process for approval under the scheme to regularise long-term undocumented migrants is estimated to take. [61552/21]

510. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the evidence applicants will need to provide to prove residency under the scheme to regularise long-term undocumented migrants. [61553/21]

511. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if she has considered a fee waiver scheme for persons and families that are unable to afford the cost of the scheme to regularise long-term undocumented migrants. [61554/21]

512. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if undocumented migrants who are awaiting approval for a stamp 4 may access the regularisation scheme. [61555/21]

513. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the documentation that stamp applicants will receive upon approval under the scheme to regularise long-term undocumented migrants. [61556/21]

518. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Justice if those who have been placed on temporary visas will be able to use this time as reckonable time in applying for the regularisation scheme for long-term undocumented migrants; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61718/21]

519. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Justice if she will consider a waiving of fees to apply from the regularisation scheme for long-term undocumented migrants for those persons on low incomes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61719/21]

520. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Justice if she will consider adjusting the regularisation scheme for long-term undocumented migrants to ensure that those who are not successful in their application will not have their cases identified and sent to the repatriation unit; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61720/21]

521. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Justice if she has considered extending the deadline of the new regularisation scheme. [61860/21]

522. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Justice if persons can apply to the regularisation scheme if they have resided in the State for 12 years in total but have left and come back two years ago; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61861/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 508 and 513, inclusive, 518 and 522, inclusive, together.

The Government has approved my proposal for a once-in-a-generation scheme to regularise thousands of undocumented migrants and their families who are living in Ireland.

The scheme will be for long-term undocumented migrants and their eligible dependents where the specific criteria is met. The scheme will only be open to those who do not have a current permission to reside in Ireland.

People who are eligible under the scheme will:

- Have a period of 4 years residence in the State without an immigration permission, or 3 years in the case of those with children, including those born in Ireland, on the date the scheme opens for applications;

- Be granted an immigration permission that allows for unrestricted access to the labour market; and

- Have years of residence with that permission reckonable for the purposes of pursuing citizenship by way of naturalisation.

Any person who previously held an EU Treaty Rights (EUTR) permission and who currently has a temporary permission to remain while their application pursuant to the relevant legislation is under consideration or at review stage would not be considered as undocumented and therefore will not meet the criteria for the recently launched regularisation scheme.

Those whose EUTR applications are currently in a process that will decide their future status within the State, if successful, will be granted permissions under the EU Regulations e.g. 5 years residence or permanent residence. This includes those who currently have applications at EUTR review stage.

Persons with an existing Deportation Order can apply, if they meet the minimum undocumented residence requirement. People with expired student permissions will also be able to apply.

All applicants must meet standards regarding good character and criminal record/behaviour and not pose a threat to the State. Having convictions for minor offences will not, of itself, result in disqualification.

Any applicant that is unsuccessful in their application will be able to appeal. That appeal will be considered by a different officer to the person who determined the original application unsuccessful. If a person does not wish to appeal, or if their appeal is also unsuccessful, they will be referred to the appropriate area in my Department's Immigration Service for follow up in accordance with the relevant legislation and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

The fees payable by an applicant are designed to reflect the effort and cost involved in processing applications for the scheme which, given the benefits involved, is quite a detailed process. A fee of €700 will generally apply to family unit applications and children up to 23 years, living with their parent(s), can be included in a family unit application. A fee of €550 will

apply to individuals' applications. There is no provision for the discretionary waiver or reduction of fees.

The processing time will be determined by the number of applications received, as each application will be independently examined and assessed in relation to the scheme's criteria and the supporting documentation provided. The time-limited scheme will open for online applications in January 2022 and applications will be accepted for six months.

Further details regarding the qualifying criteria and the opening date for the scheme will be published on my Department's Irish Immigration website (*www.irishimmigration.ie*) in due course.

Question No. 509 answered with Question No. 508.

Question No. 510 answered with Question No. 508.

Question No. 511 answered with Question No. 508.

Question No. 512 answered with Question No. 508.

Question No. 513 answered with Question No. 508.

Immigration Support Services

514. **Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor** asked the Minister for Justice if she will report on the continued delays in getting appointments using the online booking system for Burgh Quay registration office and the non-answering of emails from persons seeking appointments; and if she has plans to allocate additional resources in order to meet demand. [61583/21]

516. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Justice if the approximately 1,000 appointments being made available each week at the immigration services at Burgh Quay are all being made available for persons on the appointment booking system; if not, if some appointments are taken up by institutions that are looking to process multiple applications; if so, the number that are going to multiple applications and the number going to individuals; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61649/21]

517. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Justice further to Parliamentary Question No. 470 of 23 November 2021, and in view of remarks made by the Taoiseach in Dáil Éireann on 8 December 2021 (details supplied) the international issues that are causing delays at the INIS office, Burgh Quay; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61693/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 514, 516 and 517 together.

Currently, due to public health restrictions, for the safety of all our customers and staff, the Registration Office can only operate at 50% of our normal capacity. This means that we can register a maximum of 200 customers per day, resulting in 1,000 customers being registered every week. My officials continue to engage with stakeholders to understand how best their needs can be met.

Staff in the Burgh Quay Registration Office have been working extra hours, including at weekends, to meet the demand for first-time registrations to attend in person and to process the online renewal of permissions.

For customers seeking to register for the first time, the public office in Burgh Quay is now open from 08:00 to 20:30 to provide assistance to customers. Customers should continue to apply directly for appointments as they become available without charge, through the online appointments system: burghquayregistrationoffice.inis.gov.ie.

The online booking system is available to all customers. My Department has always engaged with stakeholders that need to register large numbers of people to agree how best to facilitate this in a way that does not impact individuals' ability to make an appointment. My Department is currently finalising plans to increase the number of appointments available to customers in the near future.

My Department is also aware that there have been issues in the past around the securing of registration appointments and has continually introduced software fixes designed to improve the system. These new measures have been partly successful in preventing the block booking of appointments by third party agents.

However, some third party agents continue to provide appointment booking services in return for payment on the basis that the person provides them with their personal details in advance. My Department strongly advises against this practice of providing sensitive and personal data to unregulated and unknown third parties.

A new Immigration Service appointment and scheduling system, which will streamline and further improve the registration process, is currently being developed and is expected to be available to customers shortly.

Parole Boards

515. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Justice the number of prisoners released on parole by the Parole Board since the new independent Parole Board came into office; the number of prisoners who were not interviewed previously by the board who have had their first contact with the parole system since the new independent board was set up; when a permanent chief executive will be appointed to the Parole Board; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61612/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, the Parole Board, established under the Parole Act 2019, is an independent statutory body that considers the eligibility for parole of prisoners serving life sentences once the prisoners concerned have served at least 12 years of their sentence.

The statutory Parole Board is an entity entirely separate from its predecessor, the Interim Board and will make its decisions about parole independently from the Minister for Justice.

In order to assist the Deputy I have sought input from the Board on the status of the number of prisoners released on parole by the Board since it came into office. I have also sought information on the number of prisoners who were not interviewed previously by the Interim Parole Board that have had their first contact with the parole system since the new independent board was set up.

It is important to say that the parole process provided for by the Act of 2019 consists of a number of steps that must be complied with before a review of a given case can occur. In that regard, the Irish Prison Service is required to notify the Board of all prisoners eligible for consideration under the Act. Upon such notification, the Board is required to invite these prisoners to apply for parole.

To date the Board has been notified of 228 such prisoners and, following the issuing of invitations, has received 191 applications from this group of prisoners. These applications have been acknowledged and the applicants have been informed that the Board will commence gathering the necessary reports required in order to give consideration to their application.

Information on the process has also been provided to these applicants and is widely available throughout the prisons estate generally. I have been informed that from an inspection of the applications currently on hand, all applicants had previous involvement with the Interim Board. In one case however, although a participant in the previous process, the application was not ready for consideration by the Interim Board prior to its cessation of operations in July 2021.

The Act also provides that victims of relevant offences may also make submissions to the Board.

Under the Act both victims and parole applicants may have access to legal representation. To that end the Board recently advertised for suitably qualified solicitors and barristers to become members of a legal aid panel and a panel of 125 such legal professionals has now been set up to provide legal assistance where the relevant parties express a desire for this.

The Deputy will appreciate that a considerable amount of preparatory work must be undertaken by the Board relating to processes, applications and corporate governance before cases can actually be considered. However, I am advised that the Board will begin making decisions on applications in early 2022.

Finally, I can confirm that the recruitment process for the post of full time Chief Executive should be finalised shortly and the successful candidate announced in due course.

Question No. 516 answered with Question No. 514.

Question No. 517 answered with Question No. 514.

Question No. 518 answered with Question No. 508.

Question No. 519 answered with Question No. 508.

Question No. 520 answered with Question No. 508.

Question No. 521 answered with Question No. 508.

Question No. 522 answered with Question No. 508.

Immigration Status

523. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Justice the residency status of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61915/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The person referred to by the Deputy was granted a five-year residence card on 4 April 2016, valid to 3 April 2021. As noted in the approval letter issued at the time, the person was advised when applying for a Permanent Residence Card at the end of the five-year period, to submit an application six months before the expiry date of the Residence Card. To date, no application for a Permanent Residence Card has been received by the EU Treaty Rights Division of my Department.

The EU Treaty Rights Division received a letter from the person referred to on 30 August

2019, which was acknowledged by my Department on 9 September 2019.

It is open to the person referred to by the Deputy to submit an application for a Permanent Residence Card. This can be applied for by completing and submitting Form EU3 by registered post to the EU Treaty Rights Division of my Department.

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

An Garda Síochána

524. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Justice if Garda recruitment will take place in January 2022; if not, if recruitment will be held later; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61929/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware the Garda Commissioner is responsible under the law for the administration and management of An Garda Síochána, including by arranging for the recruitment, training and appointment of its members. As Minister, I have no direct role in the matter.

As the Deputy will be aware, public health restrictions have unavoidably impacted on intakes to the Garda College, Templemore, particularly in 2020. I am advised, however, that the College resumed intakes earlier this year and that four intakes of a total of 385 recruits have commenced training, the most recent of which was on 15 November 2021.

I am advised by the Garda authorities that the dates for the 2022 Garda recruitment competition are currently being finalised. Budget 2022 provides for the recruitment of up to 800 additional Gardaí next year as part of the unprecedented allocation of in excess of €2 billion to An Garda Síochána.

Private Security Authority

525. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress on her plans in relation to implementing new training, licensing and standards requirements for private security contractors enforcing evictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61960/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Private Security Authority, established under the Private Security Services Act 2004, as amended, is responsible for the licensing and regulation of the private security industry in the State.

The Authority is an independent statutory body under the aegis of my Department.

Following the enactment of the Private Security Services (Amendment) Act 2021, which provided for the regulation of enforcement guards, the Authority established a working group to develop the requirements for licensing. The working group, comprising representatives of security industry employees and employers, An Garda Síochána, auditing bodies, training providers and security contractors will develop the necessary standards and training.

The initial focus of the working group has been on the requirements for contractors working as enforcement guards and the working group has developed a standard for the sector which is now out for public consultation until 6 January.

The work on the training requirements for employees has begun, however this work is more complex and will take some time to complete. The training course will be accredited by Quality Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and form part of the National Framework of Qualifications.

It is the intention of the Authority to license contractors working in the sector in the first quarter of 2022 using the new standard. A decision on whether to license employees at the same time using an existing license category pending completion of the training development is currently under consideration by the Authority.

Covid-19 Pandemic

526. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Justice the reason staff working in the Legal Aid Board are being requested to work on site in contravention of Government guidance that those who can work from home should work from home; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61971/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Legal Aid Board is the statutory, independent body responsible for the provision of civil legal aid and advice to persons of modest means, in accordance with the relevant criteria and provisions of the Civil Legal Aid Act 1995. Section 3(3) of The Civil Legal Aid Act 1995 states that "the Board shall, subject to the provisions of this Act, be independent in the exercise of its functions". The Deputy will appreciate that I have no responsibility for staffing or operational matters under the remit of the Board.

The public health advice issued by Government on 16 November 2021, states that "everyone should revert to working from home unless it is necessary to attend the workplace in person".

It is a matter for the Legal Aid Board, like all employers in the State, to determine how it operates its workplace in line with this guidance.

Residency Permits

527. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Justice if the temporary extension on immigration permissions until 15 January 2022 allows for those with temporary extension to be able to travel outside of Ireland and return on the expired work permit stamp and the Irish residence permit card (details supplied). [62005/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): On 15 November, I announced that persons with expired IRP cards may continue to use the cards to enable them to depart and return to the state in confidence. I also suspended the re-entry visa requirement for minors aged 16 years and under from 12 November 2021 to 15 January 2022.

Customers holding an Irish Residence Permit card that was in-date at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, have now had its validity period extended to 15 January 2022. This means that they may use their current expired card to enable them to depart from and return to Ireland in confidence over Christmas and until 15 January 2022.

Anyone travelling during this time can print a copy of a travel confirmation notice in the link below and display this with their existing IRP card to show proof of residence when returning

to Ireland before the 15 January 2022.

Travel Notice: *www.irishimmigration.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Travel-Confirmation-Notice-Nov-2021.pdf*

My Department has engaged with airline carriers to notify them of this new arrangement and to ensure that the process runs smoothly. It can also be displayed as proof of residence for employment purposes or to access any State services and supports that people are ordinarily eligible for.

Care Services

528. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health the number of State locations or entities offering regular residential respite for teenagers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61265/21]

529. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health if there is an all-island system in which teenagers requiring regular residential respite and unable to access it here due to capacity issues can do so in Northern Ireland; if so, the cost paid by the State; if there is not such a system, if developing one is something he will consider; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61266/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I propose to take Questions Nos. 528 and 529 together.

As the issues raised are service matters, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Question No. 529 answered with Question No. 528.

Departmental Bodies

530. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health when he expects the Cross Departmental Strategic Workforce Advisory Group in respect of home support and nursing homes will be established; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61119/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I continue to engage with key stakeholders in home support and nursing homes on issues of recruitment and retention, with multiple meetings held with such groups since I came into office. Work is ongoing within the Department to progress the establishment of a Cross Departmental Strategic Workforce Advisory Group.

The role of this group will be to facilitate the views of stakeholders and examine workforce challenges in home support and nursing homes. Potential areas to be considered include recruitment, retention, training, and the career development of home support and nursing home workers into the future.

Prior to establishing the Group, Department officials are undertaking a short-life scoping exercise which is currently underway. There is a project team in place in the Department to advance this work.

A ‘call for submissions’ issued to relevant national stakeholders on 3rd December 2021,

with a closing date for receipt of submissions of 22nd December 2021. The Department's project team will analyse submissions received to inform the setting up of the Group in early 2022 and will engage further with relevant national stakeholder on next steps including timescales, membership of the Group, and terms of reference.

Vaccination Programme

531. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health if persons presenting for Covid-19 vaccination post-infection with Covid-19 can opt to receive a vaccine (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61122/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The immunisation programme in Ireland is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The Committee makes recommendations to my Department are based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international best practices in relation to immunisation.

Following the recommendation for use of vaccines against COVID-19 by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and authorisation for use by the European Commission, the NIAC develops guidance for their use in Ireland which is contained in the Immunisation Guidelines.

The NIAC has recommended that a booster of an mRNA vaccine be offered to all persons aged 16 years and older. The Immunisation Guidelines advise that if a booster mRNA vaccine is contraindicated, consideration can be given to boosting with an authorised non-mRNA vaccine following an individual benefit-risk assessment.

Hospital Waiting Lists

532. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Health the efforts being undertaken to improve waiting times for paediatric orthopaedic care, in particular, for patients with spina bifida and hydrocephalus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61125/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I acknowledge that waiting times for many hospital procedures and appointments are unacceptably long. It is of particular regret that children can experience long waiting times for orthopaedic treatment, especially for time sensitive procedures, and I remain acutely aware of the impact that this has on children and their families.

As part of Children's Health Ireland's (CHI) paediatric orthopaedic service, most complex orthopaedic cases are treated at Crumlin and Temple Street, with Crumlin providing specialised multi-disciplinary treatment for the most complex patients. The National Orthopaedic Hospital at Cappagh provides additional capacity for the treatment of less complex orthopaedic patients, including routine scoliosis procedures. By using the capacity provided by Cappagh, CHI can free up space in order that complex orthopaedic procedures can be carried out centrally at CHI sites.

More specifically, additional theatre capacity at the National Orthopaedic Hospital Cappagh commenced on the 26 April 2021 for day case surgery. CHI has advised the Department of Health that this should result in a positive impact in reducing long waiting times for general orthopaedics, in addition to consequential capacity gains for scoliosis patients. In 2022 CHI is planning to undertake a range of inpatient, day case and outpatient orthopaedic appointments in Cappagh.

In 2018 Children's Health Ireland was provided with an additional €9 million in funding to address paediatric orthopaedic waiting lists, including the provision of scoliosis services. This funding is recurring and has been provided in the base HSE allocation each year since 2018. The additional funding supported the recruitment of approximately 60 WTEs in 2018 and 2019 to enable the expansion of paediatric orthopaedic services.

Funding proposals submitted to the HSE by Children's Health Ireland for increased investment in paediatric orthopaedic services in 2022 will be decided as part of the finalisation of the Waiting List Action Plan 2022. In addition, the HSE has advised my Department that a proposal to fund an additional theatre at Temple Street is currently progressing through the normal HSE capital approval process.

Improving access to scheduled care capacity remains a priority for the Department of Health as work continues to finalise next years' Waiting List Action Plan. For 2022 an additional allocation of €250 million, comprised of €200 million to the HSE and €50 million to the National Treatment Purchase Fund has been provided in respect of work to reduce hospital and community waiting lists.

In addition, my Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are also working on a Multi-Annual Waiting List Plan to bring waiting lists in line with Sláintecare targets over the coming years. This process will be overseen by a Ministerial Taskforce, chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of Health and includes representatives from the HSE and National Treatment Purchase Fund.

Covid-19 Pandemic

533. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding hospital visits; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61128/21]

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

534. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide an electronic copy of the full recorded NPHET meeting from 25 November 2021. [61129/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Deputy is advised that the draft NPHET minutes of 25th November are expected to be presented to the NPHET Members for their adoption at the next NPHET meeting scheduled for 16th December 2021.

NPHET minutes are published on the Department of Health website:

www.gov.ie/en/collection/691330-national-public-health-emergency-team-covid-19-coronavirus/.

Home Care Packages

535. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if the home help hours

for a person (details supplied) will be increased; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61130/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Waiting Lists

536. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that Ireland has the highest rate of spina bifida in the world; if his attention has been further drawn to the fact that many children with spina bifida are waiting surgery, particularly scoliosis surgery; if he has plans to provide the necessary funding to increase surgery capacity in order that surgeries can go ahead in Cappagh Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61135/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I acknowledge that waiting times for many hospital procedures and appointments are unacceptably long. It is of particular regret that children can experience long waiting times for orthopaedic treatment, especially for time sensitive procedures, and I remain acutely aware of the impact that this has on children and their families.

As part of Children's Health Ireland's (CHI) paediatric orthopaedic service, most complex orthopaedic cases are treated at Crumlin and Temple Street, with Crumlin providing specialised multi-disciplinary treatment for the most complex patients. The National Orthopaedic Hospital at Cappagh provides additional capacity for the treatment of less complex orthopaedic patients, including routine scoliosis procedures. By using the capacity provided by Cappagh, CHI can free up space in order that complex orthopaedic procedures can be carried out centrally at CHI sites.

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Funding proposals submitted to the HSE by Children's Health Ireland for increased investment in paediatric orthopaedic services in 2022 will be decided as part of the finalisation of the Waiting List Action Plan 2022. In addition, the HSE has advised my Department that a proposal to fund an additional theatre at Temple Street is currently progressing through the normal HSE capital approval process.

Improving access to scheduled care capacity remains a priority for the Department of Health as work continues to finalise next years' Waiting List Action Plan. For 2022 an additional allocation of €250 million, comprised of €200 million to the HSE and €50 million to the National Treatment Purchase Fund has been provided in respect of work to reduce hospital and

community waiting lists.

In addition, my Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are also working on a Multi Annual Waiting List Plan to bring waiting lists in line with Sláintecare targets over the coming years. This process will be overseen by a Ministerial Taskforce, chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of Health and includes representatives from the HSE and National Treatment Purchase Fund..

Dental Services

537. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Health the number of dentists who left an area (details supplied) who are participating in the dental treatment service scheme; the number of dentists who have resigned from the scheme in the area in 2020; the number of dentists who are still signed up in the area who would have low participation as defined by revenue of less than €5,000 from the scheme in the past two years; the efforts being made to provide dental services to medical card holders in the area; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Waiting Lists

538. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Health the number of children awaiting a consultation with a paediatric urologist at Temple Street Hospital; the number waiting up to 6, 6 to 12, 12 and 24 and more than 24 months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61146/21]

539. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Health the average waiting time for a consultation with a paediatric urologist at Temple Street Hospital in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the plans he has to reduce the waiting time for a consultation with a paediatric urologist at the hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61147/21]

540. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Health the number of children awaiting a paediatric urology procedure at Temple Street Hospital; the number waiting up to 6, 6 to 12, 12 and 24 and more than 24 months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61148/21]

541. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Health the average waiting time for a paediatric urology procedure at Temple Street Hospital in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the plans he has to reduce the waiting time for procedures at the hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61149/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 538 to 541, inclusive, together.

It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic. While significant progress was made in reducing waiting times from June 2020 onwards, the surge in Covid-19 cases in the first quarter of 2021 and the associated curtailment of acute hospital services, coupled with the ransomware attack of May 2021, has impacted waiting times.

On the 7th October I published the Acute Waiting List Action Plan. This plan, to run until December 2021, has a series of targeted measures that are designed to address the growth in

waiting lists caused by Covid-19 and the cyber-attack.

In addition, my Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) are also working on a Multi Annual Waiting List Plan to bring waiting lists in line with Sláintecare targets over the coming years. This process will be overseen by a Ministerial Taskforce, chaired by the Secretary General of my Department and includes representatives from the HSE and National Treatment Purchase Fund.

For 2022 an additional allocation of €250 million, comprised of €200 million to the HSE and €50 million to the National Treatment Purchase Fund has been provided in respect of work to reduce hospital and community waiting lists. The €250 million will be used to fund additional activity in both the public and private sectors. The €50 million additional funding provided to the NTPF brings its total allocation for 2022 to €150 million, and as a consequence there will be a budget of €350 million available to support vital initiatives to improve access to acute hospitals and community health services.

The information requested by the Deputy is outlined in the attached documents. This information shows the number of children on the IPDC & OPD paediatric urology waiting lists at Temple Street Hospital, in the requested time-bands. In regard to the requested average wait times for paediatric urology at Temple Street Hospital, the health system does not collect the data necessary to calculate average wait times. In particular, the time to treatment of patients who have already received their care is not collected. The NTPF collects data on patients currently on the waiting list and the average time that these patients have been waiting is provided here.

Total Waiters for an Outpatient Paediatric Urology Appointment in CHI at Temple Street by Wait Time Band as at 25/11/2021

Sum of Total	Column Labels				
Row Labels	0-6 Months	6-12 Months	12-24 Months	24 Months +	Grand Total
CHI at Temple St					
Paediatric Urology	138	88	156	218	600

Average and Median Wait Time for an OP Paediatric Urology Appointment in CHI at Temple St 2019-2021

Date	Average Wait Time (Days)	Median (Days)
Dec-19	393	381
Dec-20	506	464.5
Nov-21	569	581

Average and Median Wait Time for an IPDC Paediatric Urology Procedure in CHI at Temple St 2019-2021

Date	Average Wait Time (Days)	Median (Days)
Dec-19	216	160
Dec-20	318	308.5
Nov-21	416	371

Total IPDC Waiters for a Paediatric Urology Procedure in CHI at Temple Street by Wait

Time Band as at 25/11/2021

Sum of Total	Column Labels				
Row Labels	0-6 Months	6-12 Months	12-24 Months	24 Months +	Grand Total
CHI at Temple St					
Paediatric Urology	48	22	43	30	143

Question No. 539 answered with Question No. 538.

Question No. 540 answered with Question No. 538.

Question No. 541 answered with Question No. 538.

Hospital Staff

542. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Health the number of consultant paediatric urologists at Temple Street Hospital in 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61150/21]

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.

Capital Expenditure Programme

543. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Health when he will publish the HSE capital programme for 2022; and the projects, including timelines for start and completion dates, in tabular form. [61157/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Thank you for question and allowing me to provide an update on the matter.

The Capital Plan for 2021 was published in August this year and the capital planning process for 2022 and beyond is currently underway.

The Capital Plan will determine the projects that can progress in 2022 and beyond having regard to factors including the available capital funding, the number of capital projects currently underway, the cashflow requirements attaching to each project and consideration of prioritisation.

The Capital Plan 2022 has been submitted to me with the National Service Plan 2022 and is currently subject to review and thereafter publication.

Healthcare Infrastructure Provision

544. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Health the regularity with which he meets the HSE capital projects and estate team to review capital development proposals that progress

through a number of approval stages in line with the public spending code; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61158/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Health capital investment decisions are informed by Programme for Government priorities, sectoral policies, strategies, and reform initiatives as set out in Sláintecare. I and my Department engage with the Health Services Executive (HSE) in planning for and delivery of capital projects in the health sector as projects progress through the approval stages of the Public Spending Code.

The HSE is responsible for the planning and delivery of health services and management of healthcare infrastructure. Each year the HSE must develop a Capital Plan upon receipt of notification of annual allocations set in the budget and priorities set out in the Letter of Determination. These plans are then submitted for my review and approval. I meet with the HSE as required to complete this work.

As part of the ongoing performance management in plans and oversight of delivery of projects through the approval stages of the Public Spending Code, my Department meet with the HSE on a monthly basis or additionally as required, to discuss projects, progress and any arising issues. Any issues to be addressed are raised in line with the overall performance management and oversight processes in place. Meetings and engagements with the HSE are undertaken by me as required in this work.

Mental Health Services

545. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of the recommendations of the national youth mental health task force, in particular the youth mental health pathfinder project; if a pathfinder team is now in place; if so, the progress to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61159/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The proposal to establish a cross-governmental youth mental health Pathfinder unit, with participation from the Department of Health, the Department of Education and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, received Ministerial approval during the previous Government. Its establishment is a priority in the current Programme for Government.

The proposal is to formalise a new model for collaborative working within Government and place a Pathfinder unit on a statutory footing, through section 12 of the Public Service Management Act 1997. This section has not been used before.

Various administrative, budgetary, governance and legal arrangements need to be developed and agreed with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to ensure a robust and workable model for the Pathfinder unit. The demands on both Departments during the pandemic have presented challenges to progressing the proposals. Nonetheless, the Department of Health has continued to engage with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to develop an implementation option that fully addresses these issues.

Officials from the Department of Health last met with officials from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on 8 July to discuss improving proposals for governance and legal arrangements. Since then, the Department of Health has worked with the Office of Parliamentary Counsel on the proposals for governance and legal arrangements. On 6 December these draft proposals were circulated to the Department of Education and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Once agreed, these will be submitted to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

Recommendations from the National Youth Mental Health Task Force Report to build an evidence base to inform the development of youth mental health policy and service delivery, and to develop policy to give effect to youth mental health priorities and objectives, will be taken on by the new unit subject to agreement on the proposals. The report's other recommendations were incorporated into the service plans of lead agencies over the three year lifespan of the report, which concluded in December 2020. Implementation of recommendations includes: several online support projects were delivered to support online counselling, online CBT training and online signposting; schools have upskilled staff in mental health training and many disciplines have availed of mental health first aid training; early intervention projects such as perinatal training and family support projects have launched; and provision has been made in the forthcoming Mental Health (Amendment) Bill for 16- and 17-year olds to refuse or consent to their own mental health treatment.

The implementation of the Pathfinder project is a priority for me and I will continue to keep this matter under close review in the context of progressing Sharing the Vision.

Health Service Executive

546. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Health the number of HSE grade and type of professionals working in the HSE capital and estates division, by community healthcare organisation, CHO, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61160/21]

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.

Healthcare Infrastructure Provision

547. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which the HSE capital and estates division engage with external design consultancy companies on the delivery of capital projects compared with internal inhouse design reviews; the level of HSE expenditure in the past three years on external service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61161/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this question relates to engagement by the Health Service Executive, I have asked the HSE to directly respond to the Deputy on this matter.

Healthcare Infrastructure Provision

548. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Health if he has considered public private partnerships to deliver on the HSE capital programme commitment to help address the existing infrastructural deficits with regard to clinical, HIQA and building standards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61162/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Projects in the HSE capital programme are progressed in line with the requirements of the Public Spending Code and in Public Private Partnership Projects, in line with Guidelines for the Use of Public Private Partnerships (PPP). Whilst the majority of projects will be progressed using direct Exchequer funding, alternative procurement options such as use of PPP continue to be an option. In development of business cases for projects and programmes, as part of the business case consideration is given to the most appropriate procurement mechanism.

If a PPP approach is being considered, a PPP procurement assessment must be carried out involving consideration of factors such as if the project is of sufficient scale and risk/operational profile to justify a PPP approach, and to carry the high transactions costs that will be involved. This consideration involves review from my Department, the HSE and engagement with other parties including the National Development Finance Agency (NDFA).

Officials from my Department and the HSE sit on the inter-Departmental PPP Steering Committee, chaired by the DPER, which monitors and oversees progress on the current (and future) pipeline of PPP projects.

A PPP has already been used to the deliver 14 Primary Care Centres. A PPP to deliver 7 Community Nursing Units (CNU) is currently progressing and is at procurement phase.

Dental Services

549. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which dental patients can have their requirements met and progressed as quickly as possible with particular reference to medical card holders; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61167/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Dental Treatment Services Scheme (DTSS) provides dental care, free of charge to medical card holders aged 16 and over. These services are provided by independent dental practitioners who have a contract with the HSE. I am committed to ensuring the sustainability of the DTSS, but recognise that it needs to be aligned with the best international evidence and practice, as outlined in Smile agus Sláinte, the National Oral Health Policy (2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the roll-out of the National Oral Health Policy to be delayed, and the proposed review of the DTSS contract to be deferred.

Officials in my Department and in the HSE have engaged with the Irish Dental Association with a view to addressing issues around the provision of services to medical card holders and that process of engagement is continuing. Additional funding of €10 million has been provided in Budget 2022, on top of a provision of €56 million for the Existing Level of Services.

Vaccination Programme

550. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health if persons who have completed a level 6 vaccination course through a company (details supplied) can apply as vaccinators; if not, the reason; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61168/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Dental Services

551. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Health the urgent assistance his Department can provide in the early intervention of orthodontics services for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61171/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Departmental Reviews

552. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the unit or person who will have ownership of the implementation of the national cardiac services review when it is published; the lead responsible for cardiovascular policy; the way in which, aside from the HSE national heart programme, the recommendations will be advanced, monitored and evaluated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61172/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services commenced in January 2018 under the Chairmanship of Professor Phillip Nolan and a Steering Group formed from nominations of interested stakeholders representing medical, professional/technical staff, nursing and patient representatives.

The aim of the Cardiac Services Review is to achieve optimal patient outcomes at population level with particular emphasis on the safety, quality and sustainability of the services that patients receive by establishing the need for an optimal configuration of a national adult cardiac service. This aligns with the Sláintecare reform programme. In terms of scope, the National Review covers scheduled and unscheduled hospital-based services for the diagnosis and treatment of cardiac disease in adults.

Substantial progress has been made on the National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services. The COVID-19 Pandemic impacted on the progress of the review during 2020 and into 2021 as the Chair of the National Review has played a key role in the national COVID-19 response as a member of the NPHET and Chair of the Irish Epidemiological Modelling Advisory Group. However, the Cardiac Services Review is now making progress again, and the Steering Group reconvened in September 2021 with a view to finalisation of the Report.

The Steering Group is currently working on the development of the proposed recommendations of the draft Report. The implementation process for the National Cardiac Services Review is also being developed as part of the process to finalise the Report.

Covid-19 Tests

553. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Health if he will clarify an issue in regard to Covid-19 tests for travel into Ireland (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61173/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The requirements for travel are kept under regular review based on the evolving international epidemiological situation. At present, and as part of our response to the emergence of the Omicron variant, passengers travelling to Ireland require a valid test result (subject to limited exemptions). Full details on international travel policy and the types of tests accepted are published at *www.gov.ie/travel.*

From 5 December, a traveller with a valid recovery cert can show either:

- A negative PCR test result taken within 72 hours prior to arrival

- Or a negative antigen test result taken within 48 hours prior to arrival.

It is understood that some travellers may not be able to present evidence of a negative/not-detected RT-PCR test prior to travel due to persistently positive RT-PCR test after recovery. In these circumstances the person can present a positive RT-PCR result dated more than 11 days and less than 180 days prior to the date on which they arrive in the State. From 5 December,

such individuals are required to present a negative antigen test result taken within 48 hours prior to arrival.

Covid-19 Tests

554. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Health his plans for the provision of antigen tests for the early childhood care and education sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61176/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I understand that colleagues in the HSE are supporting the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, as they explore how antigen testing may be utilised further in early childcare settings.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Departmental Reviews

555. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if dedicated technical support and a formalised decision-making process for a health technology review has been given to NIAC to address the deficiencies identified in the briefing he received upon entering office; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61180/21]

556. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if the recommendations from the internal departmental review 2016, on the development of an immunisation policy to support the effective, transparent and accountable operation of NIAC, have been implemented to address the deficiencies identified in the briefing that he received upon entering office; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61181/21]

557. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if NIAC has been restructured since he took office as recommended in the briefing he received upon entering office; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61182/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 555 to 557, inclusive, together.

The National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) is an independent voluntary committee, comprised of expert members, set up by the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland (RCPI) at the request of the Department of Health and hosted by the RCPI.

The NIAC makes recommendations on immunisation policy to my Department. Its recommendations are based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international best practice in relation to immunisation. It continues to revise these recommendations to allow for the introduction of new vaccines in Ireland and to keep abreast of changes in the patterns of disease.

The NIAC has played an integral role during the COVID-19 pandemic by providing robust, evidenced based advice to my Department which has informed and supported decision making in relation to the use of COVID-19 vaccines in Ireland.

In order to sustain a systematic, evidence-informed approach to the generation of advice by the NIAC in relation to vaccines, immunisation, and related health matters, my Department has

been examining improved structural options for the committee.

It is important that we have an effective, fit for purpose, transparent and accountable immunisation advisory function in Ireland and my Department is currently engaged in preliminary work in relation to the restructuring of the NIAC in order to facilitate its continuing work.

Question No. 556 answered with Question No. 555.

Question No. 557 answered with Question No. 555.

Health Services Staff

558. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health , further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 369 and 370 of 11 November 2021, the assaults recorded on nurses and doctors in each of the years 2015 to 2020 and to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61187/21]

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

559. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if access to services will be provided in the case of a person (details supplied); and the supports that can be provided to the family. [61188/21]

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.

Proposed Legislation

560. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health the progress made to date on a public health (obesity) Act, in particular the work undertaken to examine restrictions on promotion and advertising aimed at children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61197/21]

574. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Health the progress that has been made on the commitment in the programme for Government to work with key stakeholders to introduce a public health obesity Bill, including examining restrictions on promotion and advertising aimed at children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61253/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 560 and 574 together.

The Programme for Government "Our Shared Future" contains a commitment to "*Work with key stakeholders to introduce a Public Health Obesity Act, including examining restrictions on promotion and advertising aimed at children"*.

The policy instrument for obesity in Ireland is "A Healthy Weight for Ireland', the Obesity Policy and Action Plan (OPAP), which was launched in September 2016 as part of the Healthy Ireland Framework. The OPAP covers a 10-year period up to 2025 and aims to reverse obesity

trends, prevent health complications and reduce the overall burden for individuals, families, the health system, and the wider society and economy.

The OPAP provides for a mid-term review to be carried out, which will lead to a refreshed and updated Plan with a revised set of actions for the remaining lifetime of the OPAP. This review provides the opportunity to consider developments and new evidence since the publication of the OPAP, and to assess which elements might best be further progressed by legislation or by other means.

The review will be informed by an evaluation of the OPAP which is being carried out by the Health Research Board Centre for Health and Diet Research, University College Cork. This process has included an assessment through an online survey by numerous experts and stakeholders, and the final report is expected to be received shortly. A strong evidence base will be required for any new legislative measures, and the review of the OPAP will build on the work already underway to identify gaps in the implementation of the Plan, including where actions need to be progressed, whether by legislative or other means, and where further research is required. This will input into what measures should be included in a Public Health Obesity Act, and stakeholder consultation will also be an important element of the considerations in relation to this.

In relation to the issues around advertising and marketing of unhealthy foods aimed at children, Ireland is currently co-leading a Work Package in this area under the EU Joint Action "Best ReMaP" (Best practices in Reformulation, Marketing and public Procurement). The title of the Work Package is "Best practices in reducing marketing of unhealthy food products to children and adolescents". Work has been underway under this Joint Action since October 2020 and there are 17 Member States participating.

Hospital Staff

561. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health when the neurology unit of Tallaght Hospital, which serves north County Kildare, will have its recommended full complement of 20 specialist neurology nurses as opposed to the 3.5 currently; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61199/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Cybersecurity Policy

562. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health the steps in place to ensure that the health system is protected from cyberattacks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61201/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The CONTI Ransomware attack on the HSE of 14th May 2021 resulted in an immediate loss of almost all ICT systems, applications and communications networks needed to support the delivery of health and social care services. As an immediate response, the HSE took all systems offline to reduce the risk of further contagion, while the situation was assessed. Funding provided this year addressed the immediate risks to the HSE, including the recovery of systems and data affected by the attack, upgrades and replacement of legacy systems and the establishment of a Security Operations Centre for enhanced monitoring of threats.

There is a need for sustained investment in ICT in the health service in the coming years to protect the health system from the risk of future attacks and the 2022 Budget includes capital and revenue funding for the HSE to enhance cyber resilience. This investment will support the maintenance of a modern and secure ICT infrastructure, to mitigate against the impact of future attacks.

Considerable work is also underway at government level to protect against future attacks. The Department of Health and particularly the HSE, as the key target of the cyber-attack in May, are working closely with the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer and the National Cyber Security Centre and its partners to strengthen ICT infrastructure and ensure that health services are resilient to future cyber incidents.

Departments are also moving to the "build to share" Government infrastructure model which protects the working environment and monitors malicious activity more efficiently. Plans are in place to establish the National Cyber Security Centre on a statutory footing and to increase staff numbers to support the critical work that they do in protecting infrastructure from future cyber-attacks.

Health Services

563. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health if his Department will allow the North Inner-City Drug and Alcohol Task Force to proceed with the appointment of its elected chair and to go ahead with organising meetings attended by all its members, including statutory representatives in order that it can carry out its essential work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61205/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): The Department of Health has engaged with the task force on the appointment of an independent chairperson to drive the work of the task force and to broaden the membership of the task force to include all local stakeholders, in line with the official task force handbook.

The Department supports the autonomy of the task force to appoint its chairperson and believes the collective membership is the appropriate entity to appoint a chairperson, on a consensual basis. It is important that the membership of the task force is afforded the opportunity to decide how it wishes to proceed on the appointment of an independent chairperson.

The Dept urged the outgoing chair to engage with all members of the task force - community, voluntary and statutory – to consider these matters on a consensual basis. Unfortunately, the task force leadership and members have not been able to resolve the impasse in the appointment of an independent chairperson of the task force.

The Department is aware that the North Inner City Drugs & Alcohol Task Force is no longer in a position to function, following the resignation of the chairperson and company directors.

I am committed to working with all stakeholders in the north inner city to establish effective, inclusive and transparent governance of the task force and of the funding that it allocates.

My officials are currently engaged in a consultation process with stakeholders on a process to re-establish the task force. I expect to shortly receive a report that sets out the next steps in re-establishing the task force.

Covid-19 Pandemic

564. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Health his plans to amend the Covid-19 vaccination certificate system to include information on booster shots; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61208/21]

569. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Health his plans to extend vaccine passports to include booster shots given that several persons have been told they will need proof of boosters to travel to certain EU countries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61230/21]

609. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health if updated vaccination certificates will be issued to persons who have received the booster dose outlining that they have received the booster; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61586/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 564, 569 and 609 together.

Preparations are underway interdepartmentally with a view to issuing EU Digital COVID Certificates reflecting additional doses.

This follows and is in line with the Implementing Decision adopted by the Commission on 17 November which lays down the technical specifications relating to additional Covid vaccination doses, and further discussions at EU level.

Theses specifications, concerning the value sets established on semantic level to allow uniform technical implementations for the EU Digital COVID Certificate, are being considered to ensure continued interoperability to support free movement across the EU.

Covid-19 Pandemic

565. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 322 of 12 November 2020, if the procurement strategy for future supplies of PPE to the health service has been fully developed; if it includes a strategy for indigenous supply; if so, the details of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61214/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Covid-19 Tests

566. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Health the arrangements that can be put in place to facilitate a person travelling to Ireland on a long-haul journey who will not be in a position to get a PCR test within 72 hours of arriving in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61215/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): At present, passengers travelling to Ireland require a valid test result (subject to limited exemptions). This requirement has been introduced on a temporary basis as part of our response to emergence of the Omicron variant. Travel requirements are kept under regular review based on the evolving international epidemiological situation and as understanding of the Omicron variant develops.

Depending on a person's travel history and health status, tests that may be accepted for travel can be a negative PCR test taken within 72 hours prior to arrival or a negative antigen test

taken within 48 hours prior to arrival. These timeframes are consistent with advices of the EU and the ECDC on travel related testing and with the aims of reducing in transit or travel related transmission of COVID-19.

Full details on international travel policy and the types of tests accepted are published at *www.gov.ie/travel.*

Dental Services

567. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide an updated list of dental practices that participate in the dental treatment services scheme in counties Louth and Meath, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61217/21]

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

568. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Health the specific health guidance that relates to the European advice note (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61220/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The requirements for travel are kept under regular review based on the evolving international epidemiological situation.

At present, and as part of our response to the emergence of the Omicron variant, passengers travelling to Ireland require a valid test result (subject to limited exemptions). A person may be denied boarding by their carrier if they do not have a valid test result. Where a person travels to Ireland without a test result, they are required to take a PCR test within 36 hours of arrival and to quarantine until the result is returned. Full details on international travel policy and the types of tests accepted are published at *www.gov.ie/travel.*

More stringent measures apply to travel from seven countries considered high-risk in the context of the Omicron variant. Persons may only travel from these countries to Ireland if they are a citizen or resident of Ireland, the UK or the EU. Passengers are required to have a negative pre-departure test and to quarantine on arrival. PCR testing is required at days 2 and day 8 after arrival. If both tests return negative, the quarantine period ends. If one test returns positive, the quarantine period is extended 10 days beyond the date of the positive test. Full details are published at www.gov.ie/travel.

Question No. 569 answered with Question No. 564.

Hospital Waiting Lists

570. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Health if he has responded to a letter from an advocacy group (details supplied) which was sent to his office on 16 November 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61233/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In relation to the query raised by the Deputy, I can confirm that a response has issued to the letter from the advocacy group con-

cerned.

I acknowledge that waiting times for many hospital procedures and appointments are unacceptably long. It is of particular regret that children can experience long waiting times for orthopaedic treatment, especially for time sensitive procedures, and I remain acutely aware of the impact that this has on children and their families.

As part of Children's Health Ireland's (CHI) paediatric orthopaedic service, most complex orthopaedic cases are treated at Crumlin and Temple Street, with Crumlin providing specialised multi-disciplinary treatment for the most complex patients. The National Orthopaedic Hospital at Cappagh provides additional capacity for the treatment of less complex orthopaedic patients, including routine scoliosis procedures. By using the capacity provided by Cappagh, CHI can free up space in order that complex orthopaedic procedures can be carried out centrally at CHI sites.

More specifically, additional theatre capacity at the National Orthopaedic Hospital Cappagh commenced on the 26 April 2021 for daycase surgery. CHI has advised the Department of Health that this should result in a positive impact in reducing long waiting times for general orthopaedics, in addition to consequential capacity gains for scoliosis patients. In 2022 CHI is planning to undertake a range of inpatient, daycase and outpatient orthopaedic appointments in Cappagh.

In 2018 Children's Health Ireland was provided with an additional €9 million in funding to address paediatric orthopaedic waiting lists, including the provision of scoliosis services. This funding is recurring and has been provided in the base HSE allocation each year since 2018. The additional funding supported the recruitment of approximately 60 WTEs in 2018 and 2019 to enable the expansion of paediatric orthopaedic services.

Funding proposals submitted to the HSE by Children's Health Ireland for increased investment in paediatric orthopaedic services in 2022 will be decided as part of the finalisation of the Waiting List Action Plan 2022. In addition, the HSE has advised my Department that a proposal to fund an additional theatre at Temple Street is currently progressing through the normal HSE capital approval process. Improving access to scheduled care capacity remains a priority for the Department of Health as work continues to finalise next years' Access to Care fund. For 2022 an additional allocation of €250 million, comprised of €200 million to the HSE and €50 million to the National Treatment Purchase Fund has been provided in respect of work to reduce hospital and community waiting lists.

In addition, my Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are also working on a Multi Annual Waiting List Plan to bring waiting lists in line with Sláintecare targets over the coming years. This process will be overseen by a Ministerial Taskforce, chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of Health and includes representatives from the HSE and National Treatment Purchase Fund.

Disability Services

571. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the steps he is taking to ensure that all acute hospitals, community hospitals, health centres and primary health care centres are fully wheelchair accessible. [61238/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Appointments Status

572. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health when a child (details supplied) will receive an appointment; the reason for the delay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61247/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Health Services

573. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the amount of the health budget for 2022 he will be allocating to supporting the local drug and alcohol addiction prevention, stabilisation and detoxing work of local authorities homeless services; the way that this builds on previous funding received over the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61250/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): The Programme for Government commits to addressing the health needs of people who are homeless. This includes the development of health and social interventions, based on an inclusion health approach, to target people who are homeless and in addiction.

The Department of Health and HSE are responsible for the delivery of a range of health services and supports to people who are homeless. The Dept provides funding of €36 million per annum to the HSE for health services and supports to people who are homeless. These include 'in-reach' service in emergency accommodation, case management and addiction and mental health supports.

Budget 2021 allocated an additional funding of €4m to address the addiction and mental health needs of people who are homeless, including:-

- the provision of health supports for new tenancies under the Housing First programme;

- the development and delivery of customised health care plans for single people living in emergency accommodation; and

- the provision of additional services for people who are homeless with complex health needs, including chronic mental health and inpatient treatment services.

In Budget 2022, an additional €1.3m was secured to provide health supports for an expansion of tenancies under the Housing First programme for people who are long-term homeless and to develop an integrated care and case management service for up to 4,000 single homeless people with complex health needs in Dublin.

Separately, €10m in Covid funding has been secured in 2022 to maintain public health measures for people who are homeless and to consolidate recent improvements in health services .

I am committed to providing dedicated funding and resources to deliver the health and addiction services required to assist the complex needs of people who are homeless.

Question No. 574 answered with Question No. 560.

Covid-19 Pandemic

575. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health if he has considered the introduction of an exemption to the need for proof of vaccination to engage in various indoor activities, specifically for those who are medically unable to receive their second dose of the Covid-19 vaccine due to a severe adverse reaction to their first dose; if not, the reason; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61255/21]

741. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Health if an update can be provided regarding proposals to accommodate those who are medically deemed unfit to be vaccinated to be allowed partake in society; if he will consider exemptions on certified medical grounds; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61856/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 575 and 741 together.

The current high level of COVID-19 infection and the dominance of the significantly more transmissible Delta variant poses a very substantial threat, particularly to those who are not fully protected through vaccination. In addition, the impact of the new Omicron variant is still unknown. Public health advice remains that those who are not fully vaccinated should avoid congregated indoor settings for their own and others safety.

The National Public Health Emergency Team gave some consideration to the issues arising for those people that cannot receive a COVID-19 vaccine for medical reasons as part of its discussions on the 18th October 2021 on the continuing response to COVID-19 and the extension of Covid Pass arrangements. The matter is being given further consideration.

The Deputies may wish to be aware that on 15 July, NIAC made a recommendation, which was endorsed by the Chief Medical Officer and accepted by the Minister for Health that while the preference was for homologous vaccination regimens (using the same vaccine as part of a two dose regime) that selective use of heterologous vaccination schedules (two different vaccines used as part of two dose regime) should be permitted where a second vaccine dose of a homologous regimen is contraindicated, irrespective of whether the first dose was an mRNA or adenoviral vector vaccine. NIAC in conjunction with the RCPI and the Irish Association of Allergy and Immunology have prepared a guide to aid vaccinators and other healthcare workers on how to advise allergic individuals in respect of receiving a COVID-19 vaccine, this guide is available here: *rcpi-live-cdn.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/FAQs-about-COVID19-Vaccines-and-Allergies_12August2021.pdf*.

Hospital Procedures

576. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the number of lung transplants and heart transplants carried out at the Mater Hospital in 2021. [61288/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Healthcare Infrastructure Provision

577. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the number of capital funding requests submitted to the HSE from the Mater Hospital specifically to address the issue of

bed capacity over the past three years; the amount requested; and the amount provided by the HSE. [61289/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Health Service Executive is responsible for the review of submissions for public healthcare infrastructure projects, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly in relation to this matter.

Hospital Staff

578. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the number of whole-time equivalent consultant haematologists attached to Naas General Hospital in 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [61290/21]

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

579. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the number of whole-time equivalent scan nurses in County Kildare in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if this number will be further increased. [61291/21]

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

580. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the number of whole-time equivalent paediatric neurosurgeons and paediatric neurologists working in the public health service in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [61292/21]

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

581. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health the number of children in County Wexford awaiting a first-time assessment for occupational therapy services; the breakdown of waiting time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61300/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Health Services

582. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health the number of children in County Wexford awaiting physiotherapy services; the breakdown of waiting time; and if he will

make a statement on the matter. [61301/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Ambulance Service

583. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health the number of ambulance call-outs in 2021 to date in County Wexford; the average call out times; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61302/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this relates to a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Regulatory Bodies

584. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the average length of time taken to recognise health qualifications by CORU; the number of applications and the approval response time for the past 24 months in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61304/21]

585. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the steps he is taking in relation to the waiting lists for CORU; the steps he is taking to review the current CORU recognition process for approving UK registered healthcare professionals to have their credentials and work experience recognised for the purposes of joining the healthcare system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61305/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 584 and 585 together.

CORU is Ireland's multi-profession health regulator for regulating health and social care professionals.

CORU's role is to protect the public by regulating the health and social care professions designated under the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (as amended), including setting the standards that health and social care professionals must meet to be eligible for registration and maintaining registers of persons who meet those standards There are two forms of application to CORU: applications for the recognition of qualifications received outside the State and applications for registration.

Professional qualifications awarded outside the State are assessed through a process of "recognition" which involves expert assessment of a qualification's alignment with the standards of proficiency required in Ireland, and assessment of professional experience and lifelong learning where required. Where a health and social care professional qualifies outside the State and applies to register in Ireland, they must apply for the recognition of their qualification. EU/EEA applicants have the right to have their qualifications assessed in accordance with the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 and Directive 2005/36/EC on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications and the European Union (Recognition of Professional Qualifications) Regulations 2017 (SI No 8 of 2017). Once a complete file has been submitted to CORU, i.e. one containing all of the required documentation, a decision must issue within four months.

CORU applies the processes available to EU/EEA applicants universally in the interests of

equal treatment of all applicants. For this reason, there has been no change to the process for UK qualified applicants arising from the UK's exit from the European Union.

CORU has provided a table with monthly figures for 2019 and 2020 for the recognition of qualifications by the relevant registration board. Timeframes are calculated from the month a complete and valid file is completed. This data is available for 2019 and 2020. Data for 2021 will be available in Q2 of 2022.

The month shown in the table is the month in which the complete file was submitted. The figures do not include decisions that are post appeal, i.e. those that require compensation measure completion or decisions within the European Professional Card (EPC) mechanism. EPC decisions have a shorter timeframe by definition.

Table: Average number of days from submission of a complete file to the Recognition Department to the making of a decision by the Registration Board on that application.

Month/Year	2019	2020
1	81.9	87.5
2	75.9	81.1
3	74.4	80.9
4	84.0	85.5
5	71.9	73.5
6	81.3	93.3
7	72.3	71.1
8	86.2	94.0
9	59.6	62.1
10	64.3	69.9
11	70.1	65.9
12	88.2	80.8
Number of decisions	631	635

In relation to timeframes for the registration of applicants, CORU has stated that the average processing time is currently 9.2 weeks for new applicants entering a profession. This represents an improvement on an average processing time of 14 weeks, which was the case during 2020.

I met with the Chairperson and CEO of CORU earlier this year and raised the issue of timeframes for the recognition of qualifications and registration applications. Following our discussion, several measures have been initiated by CORU aimed at further reducing timeframes.

Until this year applicants were required to complete the recognition process before initiating the registration process unless they had confirmed job offers. All applicants are now invited to initiate an application for registration as soon as they have submitted a complete application file to the recognition department. This will have the effect of reducing the period of time required to both complete the recognition and registration process.

This is part of a suite of innovations that have been initiated following my discussions with CORU. Further steps underway include:

- Continued reorganisation of work processes to respond to the evolving working from home context (this has changed over time requiring adjustments as the situation develops)

- Full transfer to an online application system

- Increased frequency of regulatory decision making (Registration Board meetings)

- Additional temporary staff resources

- Recruitment of additional expert assessors in 'under pressure' professions

My department will continue to support CORU in achieving its strategic vision and improving timeframes for all applicants into the future.

Question No. 585 answered with Question No. 584.

Dental Services

586. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health when a report (details supplied) which was presented to the HSE in February 2015 regarding the public orthodontic service will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61314/21]

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

587. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding the prioritisation of persons with learning disabilities regarding access to day services in Buncrana, County Donegal; the criteria for this prioritisation; the person or body that decides the priority list; and the location in which it is published in order that service users and carers can read and understand the prioritisation of the service user. [61350/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Covid-19 Pandemic

588. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health the requirements in relation to medical card holders that do not or cannot wear masks when attending general practitioner appointments given that mask wearing requirements are at the discretion of each individual doctor; the processes that are in place to ensure they can attend appointments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61352/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Government recommends that face coverings should be worn in circumstances where 2 metres distance cannot be maintained. The HSE *Guidance on Managing Risk of Transmission of Respiratory Viruses Including COVID-19 in General Practice* sets out the measures to manage the risk transmission of Covid-19 in general practice, which includes encouraging patients entering the practice to use a face covering. However, refusal of service to those who decline to wear a mask is not recommended.

General practice has continued to operate during the Covid-19 public health emergency and GPs see patients face to face where necessary, albeit with infection-control measures in place. In response to the pandemic, it has been necessary for GPs to triage patient in-person contact with GP surgeries as much as possible, to help prevent the spread of the virus and for the pro-

tection of patients and staff. GPs are performing assessments over the phone to determine if a patient needs to attend the surgery. Where clinically indicated, the GP will arrange an appointment to see the patient in the surgery.

No directive has issued from either the Department of Health or the HSE on the requirements in relation to medical card holders that do not or cannot wear masks when attending general practitioner appointments. It is expected that clinical practice should be accessible to all patients, in line with normal risk assessment procedures.

Covid-19 Tests

589. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if persons will be entitled to a refund of the cost incurred for the requirement of having an RT-PCR test taken when travelling into Ireland and the subsequent changes that occurred in the timing as to when the test should be taken in view of the changes which occurred; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61355/21]

756. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if refunds will be given to persons who had already secured PCR and antigen tests in order to travel that were not required due to the change of implementation date from 3 to 5 December 2021 for the new regulations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61999/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 589 and 756 together.

At present, passengers travelling to Ireland require a valid test result (subject to limited exemptions). This requirement has been introduced on a temporary basis as part of our response to emergence of the Omicron variant. Travel requirements are kept under regular review based on the evolving international epidemiological situation and as understanding of the Omicron variant develops. There is no facility in place to pay costs in the cases referred to. In making regulations to introduce these testing requirements, regard was given to the need for balance between the importance of the measure to protect public health and ensuring travellers have sufficient notice of a legal requirement and sufficient time to arrange testing before travel.

Covid-19 Pandemic

590. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health the restrictions that apply to persons travelling to Ireland from the United Kingdom who is an Irish citizen but a spouse is a non-UK and or non-European and both of whom have not been vaccinated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61356/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The requirements for travel are kept under regular review based on the evolving international epidemiological situation. At present, and as part of our response to the emergence of the Omicron variant, passengers travelling to Ireland require a valid test result (subject to limited exemptions). A person travelling from Great Britain, who is vaccinated and who does not have a recent travel history to a scheduled state, is required to present evidence of a negative PCR test taken within 72 hours or arrival or a negative antigen test taken within 48 hours of arrival. Passengers are also required to complete a COVID-19 Passenger Locator form. Full details on international travel policy and the types of tests accepted are published at www.gov.ie/travel.

General Practitioner Services

591. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health the number of general practitioners currently working in Charlestown, County Mayo and in other areas close by to increase the provision of general practitioner care in the area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61367/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Government is aware of the work-force issues currently facing general practice, including the limited access to GP services in certain areas.

Several efforts to increase the number of practising GPs have been undertaken in recent years. The number of entrants to GP training has increased from 120 in 2009 to 233 this year, with further increases expected as responsibility for training has transferred from the HSE to the Irish College of General Practitioners. Changes have been made to the entry provisions to the GMS scheme to facilitate more flexible/shared GMS contracts, and to the retirement provisions for GPs under the GMS scheme. An enhanced supports package for rural GP practices was also introduced.

Recent developments in relation to general practice, in particular the 2019 Agreement on Contractual Reform and Service Development, have helped to re-establish general practice in Ireland as an attractive career choice. The additional investment, which will amount to €210 million annually once the Agreement is fully implemented, provides for an increase in capitation fees, improved maternity and paternity arrangements as well as enhanced supports for rural practices. In addition, targeted funding of €2 million will also be set aside to provide additional support to practices in deprived urban areas.

In relation to GP services in Charlestown, Co Mayo and surrounding areas, 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

592. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health the number of appointments for Covid-19 booster shots offered and the rate of uptake of the booster shots since the week commencing 22 November 2021 to date on a regional basis in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61375/21]

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

593. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that fathers are being denied access to attend 12-week scans at the National Maternity Hospital, Holles Street, in cases in which partners are fully vaccinated and have no Covid-19 symptoms; the reason partners have been refused access given the advice in national media that partners can attend all pregnancy related appointments; the steps that will be taken to ensure this does not reoccur; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61403/21]

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

594. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the case of a person (details supplied); the supports that will be put in place to ensure the person continues to receive all necessary support as they enter adulthood; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61404/21]

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.

Disabilities Assessments

595. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the case of a person (details supplied) who is awaiting an assessment of needs; the length of time they should expect to wait before an assessment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61405/21]

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.

Healthcare Policy

596. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider introducing a scheme to ease the cost burden on persons and families that for health reasons are forced to buy more expensive specific types of essential foodstuffs such as gluten free products; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61436/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health Service Executive (HSE) has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicinal products under the community drug schemes in accordance with the provisions of the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013.

Therefore, I have asked the HSE to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Medical Cards

597. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Health if he will include the cost to patients of having bloods taken for analysis on the medical card scheme or on the general practitioner contract; if the practice of charging patients and the charge itself is uniform throughout the country; if his Department has agreed the charge with general practitioners; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61444/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): There is no provision under the GMS GP contract for persons who hold a medical card or GP visit card to be charged for routine phlebotomy services provided by their GP which are required to either assist in the diagnosis of

illness or the treatment of a condition. This has been advised to GPs by the HSE.

The issue of GPs charging GMS patients for phlebotomy services is complex given the numerous reasons and circumstances under which blood tests are taken. My Department and the HSE discussed this issue previously with the relevant GP representative body. However, it did not prove possible to achieve agreement that no charges for blood tests would be applied in any circumstances. It is intended to raise this issue again at an appropriate time.

It should be noted that the GP chronic disease management programme which is being phased in, having commenced last year, will involve the ongoing monitoring of patients' condition and any blood tests required in this context will be covered by the fees payable for this care.

The position remains that where a patient who holds a medical card or GP visit card believes he or she has been incorrectly charged for routine phlebotomy services by his or her GP, then that patient should report the matter to their HSE Local Health Office. The local management, upon being notified of potential inappropriate charging of GMS patients, carry out an investigation into each complaint and will, where appropriate, arrange for a refund of charges incorrectly applied by the GP.

Hospital Staff

598. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of occupational therapists currently employed at Our Lady's Hospital, Navan; the staffing level for occupational therapists at the hospital; if there is a vacancy for a line manager in the occupational therapy department at the hospital; the length of time this position has remained vacant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61454/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Nursing Homes

599. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Health the transitional funding arrangement put in place by the HSE for the care of a person (details supplied); if approval for the fair deal scheme will be completed based on the information provided; if an application for a medical card will also be approved as a matter of urgency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61457/21]

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.

Primary Care Centres

600. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health when he expects the Carrickmacross primary care centre to be operational; the number of HSE staff that will employed at the centre; the number of nurses that will be based at the centre; the different nursing specialties involved and the number for each; if clinical nurse specialists in tissue viability and wound care will based at the centre; when the recruitment process will begin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61461/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Medicinal Products

601. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide an outline of the requirements for a patient to receive approval to receive the drug ajovy fremanezumab (details supplied) which was approved by the HSE under the high-tech scheme in October 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61477/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Under the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013, the HSE has statutory responsibility for the administration of the community drug schemes; therefore, the matter has been referred to the HSE for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Hospital Appointments Status

602. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide an update on the eighty two children with spina bifida and or hydrocephalus that are awaiting orthopaedic surgical management and orthopaedic review appointments (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61478/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I acknowledge that waiting times for many hospital procedures and appointments are unacceptably long. It is of particular regret that children can experience long waiting times for orthopaedic treatment, especially for time sensitive procedures, and I remain acutely aware of the impact that this has on children and their families. As part of Children's Health Ireland's (CHI) paediatric orthopaedic service, most complex orthopaedic cases are treated at Crumlin and Temple Street, with Crumlin providing specialised multi-disciplinary treatment for the most complex patients. The National Orthopaedic Hospital at Cappagh provides additional capacity for the treatment of less complex orthopaedic patients, including routine scoliosis procedures. By using the capacity provided by Cappagh, CHI can free up space in order that complex orthopaedic procedures can be carried out centrally at CHI sites.

More specifically, additional theatre capacity at the National Orthopaedic Hospital Cappagh commenced on the 26 April 2021 for daycase surgery. CHI has advised the Department of Health that this should result in a positive impact in reducing long waiting times for general orthopaedics, in addition to consequential capacity gains for scoliosis patients. In 2022 CHI is planning to undertake a range of inpatient, daycase and outpatient orthopaedic appointments in Cappagh.

In 2018 Children's Health Ireland was provided with an additional €9 million in funding to address paediatric orthopaedic waiting lists, including the provision of scoliosis services. This funding is recurring and has been provided in the base HSE allocation each year since 2018. The additional funding supported the recruitment of approximately 60 WTEs in 2018 and 2019 to enable the expansion of paediatric orthopaedic services.

Funding proposals submitted to the HSE by Children's Health Ireland for increased investment in paediatric orthopaedic services in 2022 will be decided as part of the finalisation of the Waiting List Action Plan 2022. In addition, the HSE has advised my Department that a proposal to fund an additional theatre at Temple Street is currently progressing through the normal HSE

capital approval process. Improving access to scheduled care capacity remains a priority for the Department of Health as work continues to finalise next years' Access to Care fund. For 2022 an additional allocation of €250 million, comprised of €200 million to the HSE and €50 million to the National Treatment Purchase Fund has been provided in respect of work to reduce hospital and community waiting lists. In addition, my Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are also working on a Multi Annual Waiting List Plan to bring waiting lists in line with Sláintecare targets over the coming years. This process will be overseen by a Ministerial Taskforce, chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of Health and includes representatives from the HSE and National Treatment Purchase Fund.

In relation to the specific query raised by the Deputy regarding the eighty-two children referred to, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly as soon as possible.

Dental Services

603. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Health the number of children on the waiting list for orthodontic services in Waterford (details supplied); the length of time the children have been on the waiting list; the expected timeframe for treatment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61479/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Covid-19 Tests

604. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a series of matters (details supplied) in relation to data protection and antigen testing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61520/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): At present, passengers travelling to Ireland require a valid test result (subject to limited exemptions). This requirement has been introduced on a temporary basis as part of our response to emergence of the Omicron variant. Travel requirements are kept under regular review based on the evolving international epidemiological situation and as understanding of the Omicron variant develops. Valid test results that are accepted for travel are defined in SI 135/2021 and the requirements for travel to Ireland are published at www.gov.ie/travel. However, my Department does not have oversight of the policies of covid test providers overseas.

Health Services

605. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health the expected timeline for the delivery of the three specialist menopause clinics yet to be delivered; if the clinics will be open by the end of 2021 as planned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61521/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Government recognises that menopause is a key health issue for women in Ireland today. Arising from the work of the Women's Health Taskforce, and through funding provided under the Women's Health Fund, the first specialist menopause clinic opened at the National Maternity Hospital earlier this month. Budget 2022 supported further developments in menopause care with funding to increase the number

of specialist menopause clinics from one clinic to four clinics nationally. These additional clinics, based in Galway, Cork and Limerick, will form a core part of a new approach to menopause care for women in Ireland and it is intended that the development of these additional clinics will be progressed in 2022.

However, as the establishment of these specialist menopause clinics is an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Primary Medical Certificates

606. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Health the reason an application by a person (details supplied) for a primary medical certificate was turned down; the qualifying criteria to receive a primary medical certificate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61564/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As the Deputy will be aware, a Primary Medical Certificate is one requirement for eligibility for the Revenue Commissioners Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers (Tax Concessions) Scheme, which comes under the remit of the Department of Finance.

The medical criteria for a Primary Medical Certificate are set by the Department of Finance. An applicant must be permanently and severely disabled and satisfy at least one of the following medical criteria;

- Be wholly or almost wholly without the use of both legs;

- Be wholly without the use of one leg and almost wholly without the use of the other leg such that the applicant is severely restricted as to movement of the lower limbs;

- Be without one or both legs;

- Be wholly or almost wholly without the use of both hands or arms and wholly or almost wholly without the use of one leg;

- Have the medical condition of dwarfism and have serious difficulties of movement of the lower limbs.

In the event that a Primary Medical Certificate is not granted by the relevant Health Service Executive (HSE) Medical Officer, an appeal may be made to the independent Disabled Drivers Medical Board of Appeal, which comes under the remit of the Department of Finance.

As the issue raised by the Deputy concerning an individual application for a Primary Medical Certificate is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Mental Health Services

607. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health the details of emergency meetings held on 7 December 2021 regarding the impact of Storm Barra on the mental health services in counties Cork and Kerry, the recorded attendance of HSE managers who had agreed to attend an Oireachtas Committee on Health meeting that day and the times of the emergency meetings. [61580/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Mental Health Services

608. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health the total amount invested by Cork and Kerry HSE management in a community residence (details supplied) for persons with mental health difficulties; the breakdown of the figures for purchase, renovations, legal fees and other costs that may be associated with the residence; the projected total annual running costs of the facility; the date of purchase of the property by the HSE; the projected timeframe for the commencement of services, accounting for the possibility of planning objections; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61581/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Question No. 609 answered with Question No. 564.

Vaccination Programme

610. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will be eligible to receive a booster vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61589/21]

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

611. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to decentralising CEIS services to rural parts of County Clare to honour the commitments made in Sláintecare to provide access to community-based supports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61590/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Cannabis for Medicinal Use

612. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the steps his Department is taking to inform persons and to promote the medical cannabis access programme as a viable treatment alternative; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61591/21]

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.

Cannabis for Medicinal Use

613. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the eligibility criteria for qualifying for the medical cannabis access programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61592/21]

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.

Cannabis for Medicinal Use

614. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the way a person can apply for and access the medical cannabis access programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61593/21]

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.

Cannabis for Medicinal Use

615. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the number of participants who are currently receiving treatment under the medical cannabis access programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61594/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly as soon as possible.

Hospital Services

616. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the status of the moving of maternity services to University Hospital Limerick; if the move is still planned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61595/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In line with best international practice, it is Government policy, as re-iterated in the National Maternity Strategy, that the remaining standalone maternity hospitals, including the University Maternity Hospital Limerick, should be co-located with adult acute hospitals. This policy commitment is re-stated in the National Development Plan 2021-2030. In addition, in the context of promoting women's health, the Programme for Government commits to progress the planning, tender and design stages for the relocation of the University Maternity Hospital Limerick to University Hospital Limerick.

The HSE's Capital Plan 2021 indicates that the project brief for the University Maternity Hospital Limerick relocation is being developed. As such, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Disabilities Assessments

617. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the number and percentage of applications by CHO area for assessments of needs under the Disability Act 2005 overdue

for completion at three, six, 12 and 18 months, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61596/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Health Strategies

618. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the reason the Neurorehabilitation Strategy 2011 steering group has not met in to date 2021; his views on the negative impact the lack of communication and co-ordination will have on advancing the strategy; when the next meeting is scheduled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61597/21]

620. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health if he will fully implement the commitments of the Neurorehabilitation Strategy as per Article 26 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and to combat the level of unmet need for adults and children in the State; if he will consider multi-annual funding and resource framework in order to improve access and tackle waiting lists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61605/21]

621. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the status of the National Neurorehabilitation Strategy 2011; what aspects of it have been implemented a decade down the line; when the outstanding items will be implemented;; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61606/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I propose to take Questions Nos. 618, 620 and 621 together.

The Programme for Government – Our Shared Future' includes a commitment for advancing neuro-rehabilitation services in the community. The Health Service Executive (HSE) is leading on the implementation framework in respect of the recommendations of the National Policy and Strategy for the provision of Neuro-Rehabilitation Services in Ireland 2011-2015.

The annual current expenditure levels are set through the Estimates process. Unlike the position for capital expenditure where multi annual commitments are made within the National Development Plan, the Estimates process for current expenditure currently allocates funding on an annual (single year) basis. No formal mechanism currently exists to provide current funding on a multi-annual basis to Departments, or onward to the HSE or to disability service providers.

As the issues raised are service matters, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

619. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider extending the temporary assistance payment scheme available to healthcare establishments beyond the end of 2021 considering that infection control measures need to be sustained into 2022 and healthcare institutions need to be supported to maintain this level of infection prevention; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61598/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The Government

has provided extensive support to the Nursing Home Sector since the start of the pandemic. The Temporary Assistance Payment Scheme (TAPS) was established in April 2020 as a temporary, administrative measure to respond to the challenges being faced by the nursing home sector at the start of the pandemic, and was extended twice beyond its original planned end date.

In broad terms, TAPS had substantially fulfilled its temporary purpose of providing financial support to nursing homes to address COVID-19 and therefore it was appropriate to end the standard assistance element of the scheme in June 2021. From June onwards, in recognition of the residual risk presented by the virus, Minister Donnelly and I have agreed to the continued availability of the outbreak assistance element of the Scheme until the end of this year. This will ensure that contingency is available in the event of an outbreak.

According to the most recent available HSE data, from 24 November, over 8,172 claims had been processed, with some €120.7 million euro of direct financial support provided to the sector. Due to the extension of outbreak assistance, claims continue to be received and paid; €1.75m has been paid to nursing homes under 75 separate claims for outbreak assistance since the end of June. In total, €134.5 million has been made available under TAPS between 2020 and 2021.

There continue to be a number of outbreaks reported in nursing homes each week; however, current data suggests there may be a reduction in the number of associated cases per outbreak. The State has continued to prioritise residents of nursing homes in the response to COVID-19, including through the successful and early roll-out of the vaccine programme to nursing home residents. This prioritisation is continuing with the roll-out of booster vaccines to nursing home residents, which is expected to be completed by early December. The roll-out of booster vaccines has provided important protection for residents - booster vaccines for the over 65's commenced at the beginning of October and were substantially completed within a three week period.

As the pandemic has continued, many further support measures for private and voluntary nursing homes have been made available through the Health Service Executive (HSE), including the provision of PPE on a no-cost basis, the implementation of serial testing, the support and engagement of COVID-19 response teams and public health teams, the temporary accommodation scheme for nursing home staff and further supports. Many of these supports will continue to be provided by the HSE for the foreseeable future.

Question No. 620 answered with Question No. 618.

Question No. 621 answered with Question No. 618.

Mental Health Services

622. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 586 of 16 November 2021, the breakdown of these waiting list numbers in intervals of six months, that is, 0-6, 6-12, 12-18 and more than 18 months by CHO area in tabular form.; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61607/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Disability Services

623. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the rationale used to revoke eligibility and therefore access to personal assistance services for persons over 65 years of age; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61608/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Health Services

624. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the funding that has and will be made available through Budget 2022 to prevent young persons from entering nursing homes; the preventative measures that will be taken by his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61609/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy's question relates to a service matter, I am referring the question for response to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Budget 2022

625. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health if unspent allocations for the decongregation of disabled persons and transfer of under 65s from nursing homes for 2021 will accrue, be ring-fenced and be added to the designated Budget 2022 allocation; if this dedicated funding rolls over into the next budgetary year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61610/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Government is committed to providing services and supports for people with disabilities which will empower them to live independent lives, provide greater independence in accessing the services they choose, and enhance their ability to tailor the supports required to meet their needs and plan their lives.

Budget 2022 builds on €100m funding allocated in 2021 to enhance specialist disability services. The 2022 package totals an additional €115m.

In 2021 Funding of €3m was allocated in National Service Plan 21 (NSP21) to support 18 people with disabilities under the age of 65 to transition from nursing homes to more suitable placements in the community. Each CHO has been engaging with individuals, some of whom are supported by the National Advocacy Service, to discuss and plan for a transition to the community. Fourteen people have now transitioned, and each CHO is confident of delivering on the target by year end.

Funding of €4.2m was allocated in NSP 21 to support the transition of 144 people from congregated settings to homes in the Community in 2021. By the end of Q3 a total of 79 people transitioned from congregated settings. A significant number of people are expected to transition by end Quarter 4.

The level of funding available and the quantum of services to be provided by the HSE in 2022 will be considered as part and National Service Planning process which we expect to conclude in the coming weeks. The funding referenced by the Deputy is core funding, it recurs every year. Public financial procedures do not allow for unspent funding to be accrued and rolled over to the following year.

Ministerial Responsibilities

626. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health if there is additional legislation needed in order to transfer the disability portfolio to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth; if it is the commencement of pre-existing legislation that is generating a delay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61611/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Following the government decision to transfer the Specialist Community Based Disability Services from my Department to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, planning is well underway.

Given the scale of the transfer and the significant budget involved (c. €2.2bn in 2021), Human Resources, policy, legal and governance workstreams are underway within my Department to sequence the range of tasks necessary to effectively complete the transfer of responsibility. A Project Group has been created with representatives from both Departments to prioritise the project and senior officials have been assigned responsibility for this. Fortnightly bi-lateral meetings are taking place to ensure an efficient, collaborative approach to the overall programme of work. Relevant officials have also engaged with colleagues in the Health Service Executive.

The transfer will require the Health Service Executive to report to two Ministers for different elements of its functions and amending legislation is required to the governing Act of the Health Service Executive, namely the Health Act 2004. Following significant engagement over a period of months, an overarching legislative framework has been agreed to provide for a robust accountability structure between the Health Service Executive and the Minister of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

On the 23rd of November 2021 Government approved the priority drafting of legislation, the Health (Amendment) Bill 2021, to enable the transfer. I will shortly be seeking Government approval to proceed with the publication of the Bill to facilitate timely passage through the Oireachtas and to implement the transfer as soon as possible.

Primary Medical Certificates

627. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the outstanding applications for a primary medical certificate at present; and if a breakdown of those waiting will be provided in three month intervals (details supplied) in tabular form. [61618/21]

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 directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Primary Medical Certificates

628. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the number of outstanding applications for primary medical certificates at each year end from 2017 to 2020 and to date in 2021, by CHO in tabular form. [61620/21]

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.

Obesity Levels

629. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if there are plans for the inclusion of obesity in the HSE Integrated Care Programme for the Prevention and Management of Chronic Disease; if supports will be made available to assist those with a diagnosis of obesity to reduce the financial cost of medications associated with the management of obesity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61628/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Covid-19 Pandemic

630. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons since the start of 2021 in hospital with Covid-19 who were fully vaccinated, partially vaccinated and unvaccinated by week. [61629/21]

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

631. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons since the start of 2021 in intensive care units with Covid-19 who were fully vaccinated, partially vaccinated and unvaccinated by week. [61630/21]

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

632. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons since the start of 2021 who have died as a result of Covid-19 who were fully vaccinated, partially vaccinated and unvaccinated by week. [61631/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Appointments Status

633. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Health the status of a procedure for a person (details supplied). [61645/21]

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.

Legislative Measures

634. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if he will release the official advice he received from his Departmental officials that indicates that the chair of the review body into the Health Act 2018 should be appointed following a tendering process. [61647/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Review of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 commenced on the 8 December 2021. The Review comprises of 2 main phases. As part of the first phase of the review, information and evidence on the effectiveness and operation of the Act will be collected from women who use the service, health professionals that provide the service and the public.

The second phase of the review will be led by an independent Chair who will assess the extent to which the objectives of the Act have been achieved, analysing in that regard the findings of the three strands of information, on the effectiveness and operation of the Act. Upon completion of the review, a full report with any necessary recommendations will be submitted to the Minister for Health for consideration.

I would like to clarify for the Deputy that the person who will undertake the work on the Review will be providing a service on behalf of the Department and any contract for services is subject to public procurement rules.

Vaccination Programme

635. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health the next cohort to receive the Covid-19 vaccine after 5 to 12 years olds (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61653/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The EU Digital COVID Certificate is a document issued to help facilitate the safe and free international movement of people across the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The EU Digital COVID Certificates, based on the completion of a primary regime vaccination against COVID-19, are currently being emailed or posted out automatically. Under the Health (Amendment))No. 2) Act 2021 a person under the age of 18 years, who is accompanied by their parent, guardian or person acting in loco parentis who has proof of immunity in relation to themselves, does not have to show proof of immunity. Proof of immunity is not currently required for access to swimming pools.

Covid-19 Pandemic

636. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health the proof that EU Digital COVID Certificates (details supplied) reduce the risk of the spread of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61654/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The EU Digital COVID Certificate regulation lays down the framework for the issuance, verification and acceptance of interoperable

COVID-19 vaccination, test and recovery certificates to facilitate free movement during the COVID-19 pandemic. How each individual Member State incorporates the EU Digital COVID Certificate as part of their international travel measures is a national decision.

The requirements for international travel into Ireland are kept under regular review based on the evolving international epidemiological situation.

Covid-19 Tests

637. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide a free antigen test to every home in the State; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61677/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Testing and contact tracing continues to be a key component of the Irish Government's response to the pandemic. Currently, PCR testing is the gold standard for diagnosis of SARS-CoV-2 infection and it is essential that people who have symptoms of Covid-19 continue to be advised to self-isolate and seek a PCR test from the HSE.

Rapid testing also has a role to play as another valuable tool in Ireland's battle against COVID-19, and I have been very clear in supporting its wider use.

Antigen tests are already widely in use in Ireland, supported by the health service, in appropriate settings and contexts:

- In the health sector, the HSE has deployed rapid antigen tests for use for specific indications in the acute hospital setting, and as part of the response to outbreaks in community settings, supported by appropriate clinical governance and operational arrangements.

- In the agriculture sector, the HSE has supported the Department of Agriculture, Food, and the Marine in implementing an antigen testing programme in food processing facilities, supplementing the existing PCR serial testing programme.

- In the education sector, rapid testing pilot schemes have been underway in a number of universities, and also in other education and childcare settings.

- The HSE is also operating a pilot antigen detection testing programme for staff in a number of Residential Care Facilities for Older Persons across the country.

- Asymptomatic fully vaccinated close contacts of a person that tested positive for COVID-19 can now test themselves at home using free antigen tests sent to them by the HSE.

- Antigen tests are now provided for primary school children who are identified as close contacts as part of a pod in which there was a confirmed case of COVID-19.

Government's objective has been to ensure the widespread availability of antigen tests, that are CE marked for self-testing, at an affordable price level. Following engagement by relevant Government Departments with leading retailers and wholesalers, it is clear that due to the increased level of competition in the market, the retail price of antigen tests for consumers has been dropping, with some products now available for €3 or less. Supply chains remain robust and appear capable of meeting any potential increase in demand that may arise. Government is already supporting the price reduction seen in the market through implementation of a zero VAT rate for all Covid-19 test kits, and have confirmed this will continue into 2022.

A comprehensive, cross-Government communications campaign on the appropriate use of

antigen tests, to ensure there is clear message to the general public on when and how they should be used has also been launched and guidance material has been published on the HSE website and on gov.ie. The HPSC has also published rapid antigen testing programme guidance.

There is ongoing consideration of the use of antigen testing in other settings and in other scenarios. The role of testing and contact tracing, as part of the wider public health response, has been under ongoing review throughout the pandemic and will continue to be reviewed and amended in line with the epidemiological profile of the disease, its impact on healthcare utilisation and outcomes, the vaccination status of the population and ECDC guidance.

Alcohol Advertising

638. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health when measures reducing children's exposure to alcohol advertising as enacted by the Public Health (Alcohol) Act in 2018 will be commenced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61680/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Research evidence consistently shows that exposure to alcohol advertising is associated with an increased likelihood that children will start to drink alcohol or will drink greater quantities if they already do. This is why our Public Health (Alcohol) Act contains strong measures to limit the exposure of our children to alcohol marketing.

In November 2019, sections 14, 17 and 20 of the Act came into effect. Section 14 prohibits alcohol advertising in or on public service vehicles, at public transport stops or stations and within 200 metres of a school, a crèche or a local authority playground will be prohibited. Section 17 prohibits the sale of children's clothing that promotes alcohol and section 20 prohibits alcohol advertising in a cinema except around films with an 18 classification or in a licensed premises in a cinema.

In November 2020, section 22 of the Act came into effect. It provides that, in mixed retail outlets, alcohol products and advertising are confined to one of the following:

- an area separated by a 1.2 metre high barrier, or
- units in which alcohol products are not visible up to 1.5 metres height, or
- up to three units that can be a maximum of 1 metre wide by 2.2 metres high.

In addition alcohol products can be contained but not be visible in a unit behind the counter.

Section 15 and 16 of the Act came into force on 12 November of this year. These provisions restrict alcohol advertising and sponsorship promoting alcohol products, and include a ban on alcohol advertising and sponsorship at events aimed particularly at children or at which the majority of participants or competitors are children. These measures will help to ensure that children can grow up in circumstances where they are not regularly exposed to alcohol products and alcohol advertising.

Section 13 of the Act relates to the content of advertisements for alcohol products. This section cannot be commenced until regulations under this section have been made. Draft regulations under Section 13 are currently being developed by my Department; upon finalisation, they must be submitted to the European Commission for assessment as to whether they are in alignment with Single Market principles.

Section 19 of the Act provides for a broadcast watershed for alcohol advertisements on

television and radio. It has not yet been commenced as it requires further engagement on compliance and enforcement issues with the Environmental Health Service of the HSE and the Broadcast Authority of Ireland.

Work on commencement of these remaining sections of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act was suspended throughout 2020 and much of 2021 due to resources being diverted to COVID-19 related areas; that work has now restarted. The full implementation of the Act remains a priority.

Health Strategies

639. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health when the national stroke strategy will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61681/21]

752. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Health when the HSE will produce the first national stroke strategy; and if there will be provision for a properly-funded annual fast campaign as called for by an organisation (details supplied). [61970/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 639 and 752 together.

I wish to advise that the HSE's National Clinical Programme (NCP) for Stroke final draft National Stroke Strategy 2021-2026 was presented at the HSE Chief Clinical Officer (CCO) Clinical Forum at its meeting last July 2021 and was subsequently clinically approved by the Forum, following some minor changes.

The HSE advise that the strategy is now progressing for implementation and consideration is being given through the HSE 2022 National Service Planning process for funding opportunities, looking at alignment, synergy and integration with other current significant HSE programmes of work such as Enhanced Community Care, National Integrated Care Programme for Older People (NICPOP) and so forth. This will ensure that service delivery requirements outlined in the Stroke Strategy are integrated with other programmes of work and will support the HSE National Service Plan for 2022.

I have asked the Health Service Executive to provide the detailed information sought by the Deputy and I will forward this information to him as soon as it is available.

Nursing Homes

640. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health when the fair deal scheme for a person (details supplied) will be paid; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61683/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Information and Communications Technology

641. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if computers using an operating system (details supplied) are still in use in his Department or in the HSE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61685/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): My Department has no computers using the detailed operating system. In respect of the HSE, as this is a service matter I have asked them to respond directly to the Deputy.

Disability Services

642. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if he has read the recently published report by the Ombudsman entitled "Grounded: Unequal access for people with disabilities to personal transport schemes", a commentary by the Ombudsman; his plans to address the issues raised in the report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61690/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): The Ombudsman issued commentary on three transport support schemes for people living with a disability. Those are the now closed *Motorised Transport Grant* and *Mobility Allowance Schemes* and the Revenue Commissioners *Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers (Tax Concessions) Scheme.*

The Government decided to close the *Motorised Transport Grant* and *Mobility Allowance* administrative Schemes in 2013, on foot of the Ombudsman reports in 2011 and 2012 regarding the legal status of both Schemes in the context of the Equal Status Acts.

Other transport supports available to people with disabilities, include;

- The *Free Travel Scheme* operated by the Department of Social Protection;

- The Revenue Commissioners' *Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers (Tax Concessions) Scheme*; and

- Measures funded under the Department of Rural and Community Development *CLÁR Programme*, to provide grants to voluntary organisations providing transport for people with significant mobility issues.

Under the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017 - 2021, the Department of Transport has responsibility for the continued development of the availability of accessible public transport and is committed to this in recognition of the importance of such services to the lives of people with disabilities.

Work is continuing on the policy proposals for the provision of transport supports for people with disabilities. Recent developments which will impact on the policy options include the following:

- The ongoing progress by the Department of Transport in providing accessible public transport nationally and that Department's review of active travel and public transport policy, including accessible public transport;

- The Cost of Disability Study, commissioned by the Department of Social Protection, which will inform policy direction in relation to the provision of adequate supports to meet the needs of people with disabilities, including transport costs;

- The Working Group established under the National Disability Inclusion Strategy to lead a review of all Government funded transport and mobility schemes for people with disabilities; and

- The Department of Finance's commitment to review the *Disabled Drivers and Disabled*

Passengers (Tax Concessions) Scheme.

Medical Aids and Appliances

643. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which medical equipment loaned to patients and service users is reused or recycled when it is no longer required by said persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61691/21]

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

644. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health the uptake rate on eligible women attending for CervicalCheck appointments; if he will provide a breakdown by age category and county for each of the years 2019, 2020 and up to 30 September 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61695/21]

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

645. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health the actions being taken by his Department to target reported low attendance rates for CervicalCheck appointments by women aged over 50 in certain counties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61696/21]

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

646. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if the backlog of screening tests due to the suspension of CervicalCheck as a result of Covid-19 in 2020 has now been cleared; the number of tests that were carried out in 2019, 2020 and up to 30 September 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61697/21]

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

647. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health the number of cervical cancer diagnoses that were made in 2019, 2020 and up to 30 September 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61698/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The National Cancer Registry Ireland (NCRI) collects, classifies, records and stores information in relation to each newly diagnosed

individual cancer patient, and in relation to each tumour that occurs.

The NCRI advises that figures for the number of women diagnosed with cervical cancer in Ireland for 2020 have not yet been fully validated. The most recently available 5-year data, from the NCRI annual statistical report (published Dec 2021), cover the period 2015-2019 and are as follows:

Tumour	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Cervical Cancer	248	292	296	307	274

Health Services

648. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide details of the efficacy of the new cervical cancer test that detects HPV; the number of tests that have been HPV positive with no abnormal cell changes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61699/21]

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

649. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health the number of unvaccinated persons who are being treated in intensive care units in all hospitals in the country. [61701/21]

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

650. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the amount spent by the HSE on agency staff from 2017 to date by year and location in tabular form. [61706/21]

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.

National Treatment Purchase Fund

651. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the amount spent through the NTPF from 2017 to date by year; and the organisations to which such payments were made. [61707/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In relation to the particular query raised by the Deputy, the attached table, provided by the National Treatment Purchase Fund, outlines the expenditure incurred by the NTPF in public and private hospitals to provide inpatient/day-case and outpatient services to patients in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020.

Expenditure incurred by NTPF related to payments to private and public hospitals to provide inpatient and outpatient services to patients.	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Private Hospitals	9,948,651	31,420,173	29,204,118	22,957,536	93,530,478
Public Hospitals	3,101,350	17,364,472	29,750,949	47,516,961	97,733,732
Total	13,050,001	48,784,645	58,955,067	70,474,497	191,264,210

Health Services

652. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the amount spent on outsourcing services to the private sector from 2017 to date by year and organisation in tabular form; and the services this spending related to. [61708/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The information requested by the Deputy is not immediately available. I will ask my officials to collate the information and will respond to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Health Services

653. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the amount spent on and by section 38 organisations from 2017 to date. [61709/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Department of Health does not directly fund any charitable voluntary groups. Under Section 38 of the 2004 Health Act funding is provided by the Health Service Executive. I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to you directly in relation to this matter.

Please copy finance_unit@health.gov.ie in your reply.

Health Services

654. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the amount spent on and by section 39 organisations from 2017 to date. [61710/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Department of Health does not directly fund any charitable voluntary groups. Under Section 39 of the 2004 Health Act funding is provided by the Health Service Executive. I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to you directly in relation to this matter.

Please copy finance_unit@health.gov.ie in your reply.

Hospital Services

655. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the amount of public funding spent by public hospitals on private healthcare services within each hospital from 2017 to date, in tabular form. [61711/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Services

656. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the amount of public funding spent by public hospitals on private healthcare services from 2017 to date by hospital in tabular form. [61712/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Health Services

657. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the amount of public funding spent by his Department, the HSE and all other public healthcare providers on external consultancy work from 2017 to date by purchaser, in tabular form. [61713/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Department's total expenditure in the A7 subhead consultancy for the years requested since 2017 is as per the tables below. It is the policy in my Department only to engage the services of external consultants where highly specialised skills are not available within the Department and, in particular, when such an approach is felt to be more appropriate and cost-effective.

The attached tables outline the total amount spent on external consultants from 2017 to date. While some contacts are negotiated on the basis of a daily and hourly rate, others are paid a fee on the basis of reaching a number of milestones during the process and in some case producing a report.

I have asked the HSE to respond directly with their report.

[Table]

Hospital Admissions

658. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the number of hospital admissions that occurred through University of Limerick Hospitals Group accident and emergency or the acute medical assessment unit due to diabetic ketoacidosis in persons with pre-existing diabetes or diagnosed with diabetes after admission in each of the years 2017 to 2020, in tabular form. [61722/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Admissions

659. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the number of hospital admissions that occurred through University of Limerick Hospitals Group accident and emergency or the acute medical assessment unit due to severe hypoglycaemia in each of the years 2017 to 2020 in the age ranges 18 to 24, 25 to 34, 35 to 44, 45 to 54, 55 to 64 and over 65 years of age, in tabular form. [61723/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Waiting Lists

660. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on the waiting list for the adult type 1 diabetes outpatient clinics; the number of persons on the waiting list for the adult type 2 diabetes outpatient clinics; the estimated waiting time to be seen at outpatient diabetes clinics in University Hospital Cork; and the number of persons that do not reside in counties Cork, Kerry, Waterford, or south County Tipperary, in tabular form. [61724/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Waiting Lists

661. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on the waiting list for the adult type 1 diabetes outpatient clinics; the number of persons on the waiting list for the adult type 2 diabetes outpatient clinics; the estimated waiting time to be seen at outpatient diabetes clinics in University Hospital Galway; and the number of persons that do not reside in counties Galway, Mayo, Sligo or Roscommon, in tabular form. [61725/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Staff

662. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the number of whole-time equivalent advanced nurse practitioners, clinical nurse specialists and integrated care clinical nurse specialists that are currently in post in University of Limerick Hospitals Group adult diabetes services. [61726/21]

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

663. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health his estimate of the number of Covid-19 patients in intensive or critical care, if 100% of the population eligible for a vaccine was vaccinated. [61727/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The rate of COVID-19 related hospi-

talisations and ICU admissions in the population is determined by several factors, particularly the prevailing force of infection in the community, the proportion of those infected who are in the older age groups or at-risk groups, population immunity levels arising from vaccination or prior infection and overall adherence to the public health measures in place to reduce the risk of transmission.

Vaccination is the most effective way to prevent hospitalisations, severe illness and death related to COVID19 and it is a particular priority to ensure that all eligible people are fully vaccinated. However, vaccinations are not 100% effective, and some fully vaccinated people will become infected (breakthrough infection) and experience illness. While the benefits of vaccination against hospitalisation and deaths have been sustained for at least six months for all European Medicines Agency (EMA) authorised vaccines, the risk of breakthrough infections and symptomatic disease increases over time.

In Ireland, as of 9th December more than 90% of those aged 12 years and older are fully vaccinated. Ireland is currently undergoing a prolonged surge in case numbers despite high vaccine uptake, with an associated high level of ICU admissions. This is considered to be due to a number of factors, including the highly transmissible Delta variant, waning of vaccine immunity and the opening up of society over recent months with an increase in socialisation. The rate of hospitalisation of unvaccinated people is substantially higher than in those who are fully vaccinated. However, as vaccination rates are so high, the proportion of those vaccinated who are admitted to hospital and ICU settings is increasing

The risks of severe COVID-19, hospitalisation and ICU admission are lower in younger people, but are not negligible. The presence of an underlying condition increases the risk of severe COVID-19 and booster vaccination has been recommended for those identified in this category. For all, there remains a residual risk, that decreases with age, of severe COVID-19 even in those with no risk factors. This risk will increase as the force of infection in the community remains high and as time from initial primary vaccination schedule elapses.

Ireland is currently in a very uncertain and unstable position due to the high incidence of COVID-19 driven by the highly transmissible Delta variant. This is a matter of very significant concern as we wait for more evidence relating to the Omicron variant and the impact it may have to emerge.

I am advised that based on the evidence available to us, we believe that the public health measures we are so familiar with will work to slow and stop the transmission of the Omicron variant, as well as the Delta variant. Early indications suggest that a booster dose of COVID-19 vaccine will offer good protection against infection from Delta and Omicron.

It is of the utmost importance that all those eligible for a booster dose of COVID-19 vaccine take the opportunity to receive this vaccine as soon as it is offered. Similarly, those yet to receive a primary dose of COVID-19 vaccine should come forward as soon as possible. COVID-19 related hospitalisation and severe illness can be prevented by optimising the protection afforded by vaccination.

Covid-19 Pandemic

664. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of vaccinated Covid-19 patients who were in hospital on 3 December 2021; and the number that were in intensive or critical care on the same date. [61728/21]

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

665. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of unvaccinated Covid-19 patients that were in hospital on 3 December 2021; and the number that were in intensive or critical care on the same date. [61729/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Abortion Services

666. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health if healthcare workers in maternity hospitals are allowed in law and practice to be conscientious objectors when it comes to the delivery of abortion services. [61743/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy will be aware, section 22 of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 deals with conscientious objection by members of medical staff in relation to the provision of termination of pregnancy services. This section states that where he/she has a conscientious objection, a medical practitioner, nurse or midwife shall not be obliged to carry out, or participate in the carrying out, a termination of pregnancy. In the event of a doctor, nurse or midwife having a difficulty in undertaking a required medical procedure, he or she will have a duty to make arrangements for the transfer of the woman's care to a colleague. The Act makes it clear that conscientious objection cannot be invoked in an emergency situation, when the risk to a pregnant woman's life or health is immediate. Conscientious objection is limited to persons involved in the delivery of the treatment only and does not extend to any other persons, or to institutions. Section 49 of the most recent version of the Medical Council's Guide to Professional Conduct and Ethics for Registered Medical Professionals, published in August 2019, reiterates these provisions.

Home Help Service

667. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter (details supplied) in relation to home help services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61751/21]

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.

Ambulance Service

668. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter regarding the cost of services provided by a company (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61753/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is an operational matter for the

National Ambulance Service in the first instance I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Disability Services

669. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons with disabilities in receipt of home support hours in each LHO area as of 1 December 2021 or the latest date available; the number of persons currently on the waiting list for same in each LHO area; and the number waiting 0 to 3, 3 to 6, 6 to 12 and more than 12 months in tabular form. [61758/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Disability Services

670. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons with disabilities in receipt of personal assistance hours in each LHO area as of 1 December 2021 or the latest date available; the number of persons currently on the waiting list for same in each LHO area; and the number waiting 0 to 3, 3 to 6, 6 to 12 and more than 12 months in tabular form. [61759/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Disability Services

671. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of residential places for persons with a disability currently being provided as of 1 December 2021 or the latest date available by CHO in tabular form. [61760/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy's question relates to a service matter, I am referring the question for response to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Disability Services

672. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of new emergency places provided to persons with a disability as of 1 December 2021, by local health office in tabular form. [61761/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy's question relates to a service matter, I am referring the question for response to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Disabilities Assessments

673. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of children as of 1 December 2021 or the latest date available that were awaiting a first assessment from the HSE under the Disability Act 2005 by local health office area in tabular form. [61762/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Health Services

674. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on the physiotherapy waiting list by local health area as of 1 December 2021 or the latest date available; the number waiting less than four, four to 12 and more than 12 months; and the number waiting aged zero to four, five to 17, 18 to 64 and aged 65 plus. [61763/21]

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

675. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on the speech and language therapy assessment waiting list by local health area as of 1 December 2021 or the latest date available; the number waiting less than four, four to 12 and more than 12 months; and the number waiting aged zero to 17 and over 18 years of age. [61764/21]

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

676. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on the speech and language therapy initial treatment waiting list by local health area as of 1 December 2021 or the latest date available; the number waiting less than four, four to 12 and more than 12 months; and the number waiting aged zero to 17 and over 18 years of age. [61765/21]

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

677. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on the speech and language therapy further treatment waiting list by local health area as of 1 December 2021 or the latest date available; the number waiting less than four, four to 12 and more than 12 months; and the number waiting aged zero to 17 and over 18 years of age. [61766/21]

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

678. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on the occupational therapy first time assessment waiting list by local health area as of 1 December 2021 or the latest date available; the number waiting less than four, four to 12 and more than 12 months; and the number waiting aged zero to four, five to 17, 18 to 64 and 65 years of age plus. [61767/21]

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 Services

679. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons in each LHO area waiting for a podiatry appointment in primary care as of 1 December 2021 or the latest date available; and the number waiting zero to 12, 12 to 26, 26 to 52 and more than 52 weeks, respectively. [61768/21]

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 Services

680. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons in each LHO area waiting for an ophthalmology appointment in primary care as of 1 December 2021 or the latest date available; and the number waiting zero to 12, 12 to 26, 26 to 52 and more than 52 weeks, respectively. [61769/21]

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 Services

681. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons in each LHO area waiting for an audiology appointment in primary care as of 1 December 2021 or the latest date available; and the number waiting zero to 12, 12 to 26, 26 to 52 and more than 52 weeks, respectively. [61770/21]

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 Services

682. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons in each LHO area waiting for a dietetics appointment in primary care as of 1 December 2021 or the latest date available; and the number waiting zero to 12, 12 to 26, 26 to 52 and more than 52 weeks, respectively. [61771/21]

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

683. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons in each LHO area waiting for a psychology appointment in primary care as of 1 December 2021 or the latest date available; and the number waiting zero to 12, 12 to 26, 26 to 52 and more than 52 weeks, respectively. [61772/21]

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

684. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons in each LHO area waiting for a counselling appointment in primary care as of 1 December 2021 or the latest date available; and the number waiting zero to 12, 12 to 26, 26 to 52 and more than 52 weeks, respectively. [61773/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Mental Health Services

685. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons in each LHO area waiting for a child and adolescent mental health services appointment in primary care as of 1 December 2021 or the latest date available; and the number waiting zero to 12, 12 to 26, 26 to 52 and more than 52 weeks, respectively. [61774/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Mental Health Services

686. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of children admitted to adult mental health units to date in 2021. [61775/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Home Care Packages

687. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of home support hours being provided in each LHO area as of 1 December 2021 or the latest date available; the way

that compares to target in each LHO area for the same time period; the number of persons currently on the waiting list for home support hours in each LHO area; and the number waiting zero to three, three to six, six to 12 and more than 12 months plus, respectively, in tabular form. [61776/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Nursing Homes

688. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons awaiting placement under the fair deal scheme as of 1 December 2021 or the latest date available; the average waiting time; the number of persons currently awaiting placement under the scheme in each local health area in tabular form; and the length of time waiting. [61777/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Medical Cards

689. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of medical cards as of 1 December 2021; the number of general practitioner cards on the same date; and the number for each type of card issued on a discretionary basis on that date. [61778/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Services

690. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of delayed discharges in each public and voluntary hospital at the end of November 2021; and the total number to date in 2021, in tabular form. [61779/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Services

691. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of bed days lost in each public and voluntary hospital owing to delayed discharges to date in 2021, in tabular form. [61780/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Emergency Departments

692. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients aged 75 or over who experienced an emergency department wait time more than 24 hours during November 2021; the number to date in 2021; and the hospitals in which the wait occurred. [61781/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Ambulance Service

693. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of ambulance attendances at each emergency department nationwide in November 2021; the number of such ambulances that waited longer than of 20 minutes to hand over patients, get their trolleys back and return to responding to calls; and the number that waited longer than 40, 60, 90, 120 and more than 180 minutes for same, respectively, in tabular form. [61782/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Waiting Lists

694. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of spinal fusion patients currently waiting less than four, four to eight and more than eight months for both Our Lady's Children's Hospital, Crumlin and Temple Street Children's University Hospital for the end of November 2021 or the latest date available; and if he will provide the same information for other spinal patients. [61783/21]

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 Waiting Lists

695. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an MRI scan in the RCSI hospital group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61784/21]

696. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for a CT scan in the RCSI hospital group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61785/21]

697. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an MRI scan in the Dublin Midlands Hospital Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61786/21]

698. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for a CT scan in the Dublin Midlands Hospital Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respec-

tively, in tabular form. [61787/21]

699. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for a bone scan in the Dublin Midlands Hospital Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61788/21]

700. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an angiogram in the Dublin Midlands Hospital Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61789/21]

701. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an electroencephalogram in the Dublin Midlands Hospital Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61790/21]

702. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for cholangiopancreatography in the Dublin Midlands Hospital Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively. in tabular form. [61791/21]

703. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an ultrasound scan in the Dublin Midlands Hospital Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61792/21]

704. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an MRI scan in the South/South West Hospital Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61793/21]

705. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for a CT scan in the South/South West Hospital Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61794/21]

706. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for a bone scan in the South/South West Hospital Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61795/21]

707. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an angiogram in the South/South West Hospital Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61796/21]

708. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an electroencephalogram in the South/South West Hospital Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61797/21]

709. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for cholangiopancreatography in the South/South West Hospital Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than

12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61798/21]

710. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an ultrasound scan in the South/South West Hospital Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61799/21]

711. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an MRI scan in the Saolta University Health Care Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61800/21]

712. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for a CT scan in the Saolta University Health Care Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61801/21]

713. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for a bone scan in the Saolta University Health Care Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61802/21]

714. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an angiogram in the Saolta University Health Care Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61803/21]

715. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an electroencephalogram in the Saolta University Health Care Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61804/21]

716. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for cholangiopancreatography in the Saolta University Health Care Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61805/21]

717. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an ultrasound scan in the Saolta University Health Care Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61806/21]

718. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an MRI scan in the University of Limerick Hospitals Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61807/21]

719. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for a CT scan in the University of Limerick Hospitals Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61808/21]

720. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for a bone scan in the University of Limerick Hospitals Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months,

respectively, in tabular form. [61809/21]

721. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an angiogram scan in the University of Limerick Hospitals Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61810/21]

722. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an electroencephalogram in the University of Limerick Hospitals Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61811/21]

723. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for cholangiopancreatography in the University of Limerick Hospitals Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61812/21]

724. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an ultrasound scan in the University of Limerick Hospitals Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61813/21]

725. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for a bone scan in the RCSI Hospitals Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61814/21]

726. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an angiogram in the RCSI Hospitals Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61815/21]

727. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an electroencephalogram in the RCSI Hospitals Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61816/21]

728. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for cholangiopancreatography in the RCSI Hospitals Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61817/21]

729. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an ultrasound scan in the RCSI Hospitals Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61818/21]

730. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an MRI scan in the Ireland East Hospital Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61819/21]

731. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for a CT scan in the Ireland East Hospital Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respec-

tively, in tabular form. [61820/21]

732. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for a bone scan in the Ireland East Hospital Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61821/21]

733. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an angiogram in the Ireland East Hospital Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61822/21]

734. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an electroencephalogram in the Ireland East Hospital Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61823/21]

735. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for cholangiopancreatography in the Ireland East Hospital Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61824/21]

736. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting as of 1 December 2021 or the nearest available date for an ultrasound scan in the Ireland East Hospital Group for less than three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [61825/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 695 to 736, inclusive, together.

The HSE advises that a pilot project commenced in 2016 by the HSE Acute Hospitals Division to progress the collection of national radiology waiting list data. The project has been supported by the Radiology Clinical Care Programme and has involved key stakeholders across the system including the National Integrated Medical Imaging System (NIMIS) Team, Hospital Groups, and the support of the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) for data collection and data management expertise.

The latest available diagnostic waiting list data is outlined in the documents attached, which set out waiting list data for Quarter 3 2021 for CT, MRI and Ultrasound. The HSE advises that, at present, the further diagnostic scans requested by the Deputy (including cholangiopancreatography, electroencephalogram, angiogram, and bone scan), are not yet captured as part of this project.

The information that is currently being collected is presently being tested and validated at hospital, hospital group and national level and as such should not be used/reported without the context of the caveats set out below:

- Data is subject to inclusions and exclusions which are documented in the Data Profile Document. This document is available from Acute Operations and has been circulated to all Hospital Groups.

- Data contains urgent, routine and surveillance/planned activity which is currently not broken down in detail, as such this includes surveillance/planned activity which may not be exceeding planned date.

- Data is still undergoing validation at Hospital and Hospital Group level.

- Data does not take into account local nuances at site level (Site profile developed to support understanding of same).

- The purpose of this aggregate data is to provide a National Level overview of the number of patients waiting for modalities of CT, MRI and Ultrasound.

- This report is not intended to be used for the active management of hospital diagnostics waiting list, local reports and mechanisms should continue to be used for the management of diagnostics waiting lists at hospital level.

In Q3 2021, there were a total of 225,538 patients reported on the waiting list from all sites, this represents all outpatients waiting, urgent, semi urgent, routine and planned/surveillance (where diagnostic access is planned at particular time intervals).

[Diagnostic Report]

Question No. 696 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 697 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 698 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 699 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 700 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 701 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 702 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 703 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 704 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 705 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 706 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 707 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 708 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 709 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 710 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 711 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 712 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 713 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 714 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 715 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 716 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 717 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 718 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 719 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 720 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 721 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 722 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 723 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 724 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 725 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 726 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 727 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 728 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 729 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 730 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 731 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 732 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 733 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 734 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 735 answered with Question No. 695.

Question No. 736 answered with Question No. 695.

Health Services

737. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Health the way in which the reimbursement of travel costs for haemodialysis patients is administered; the rate per kilometre; if it is paid through the hospital administering the treatment or centrally by the HSE; the reason some patients are paid monthly and others less frequently; and the timeframe for payment specified by the HSE. [61834/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly)(Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Health Service Executive

738. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) can expect a decision on their cross-Border application and reimbursement for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61849/21]

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

739. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health the measures taken by his Department to ensure ventilation and clean air quality in public and private nursing homes particularly in relation to the installation of CO2 monitors, ventilation systems and HEPA filters; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61850/21]

747. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the steps his Department is taking to ensure proper ventilation and air quality regulation in nursing homes due to the threat of the spread of Covid-19 in these facilities; if his Department will provide funding for the installation of CO2 monitors and air purification systems in nursing homes; if the possible allocation of such funds has been costed by his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61919/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly)(Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 739 and 747 together.

The Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) of the HSE has developed, published and regularly reviews a comprehensive package of public health and infection prevention and control guidance for long-term residential care facilities. This includes the comprehensive "Public Health & Infection Prevention & Control Guidelines on the Prevention and Management of Cases and Outbreaks of COVID-19, Influenza & other Respiratory Infections in Residential Care Facilities", most recently updated on 30th November 2021. This guidance also refers to ventilation, providing advice on circumstances where ventilation may be improved. Additionally, there are well established regulations and standards, including HIQA's National Standards for infection prevention and control (IPC) in community services which provide a comprehensive package of IPC measures.

Regulation 17 of the Health Act 2007 (Care and Welfare of Residents in Designated Centres for Older People) Regulations 2013 also requires registered providers to provide premises that conform to specific matters set out in the regulations, which includes "ventilation, heating and lighting suitable for residents in all parts of the designated centre which are used by resident". As such, registered providers may make a determination on any appropriate interventions having regard to their individual circumstances.

Vaccination Programme

740. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health if there have been many recorded serious adverse reactions to any of the Covid-19 vaccines; and if redress is available to persons in such circumstances. [61854/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HPRA provides information and updates related to the regulation of COVID-19 vaccines. The HPRA is publishing regular safety updates which provide an overview of the national reporting experience for COVID-19 vac-

cines. These updates include an overview of reports of suspected side effects notified to the HPRA safety monitoring system and is provided as an enhanced transparency measure for members of the public and healthcare professionals. Available at: www.hpra.ie/homepage/medicines/covid-19-updates/covid-19-vaccine-communications.

In June 2018, the Government agreed to the establishment of the expert group to review the management of clinical negligence claims. It was chaired by the High Court judge, Mr. Justice Charles Meenan. The expert group examined the system from the perspective of the person who has made the claim to explore if there is a better way to deal effectively, yet more sensitively, with certain cases.

Mr. Justice Meenan submitted the final report on the current system for managing clinical negligence claims to the then Minister for Health and Minister for Justice in January 2020, prior to the onset of the Covid pandemic. The Government subsequently published the Meenan report in December 2020. One of the report's recommendations is that a compensation scheme be established.

On foot of a request from my Department, the Health Research Board, HRB, carried out an evidence review on the vaccine injury redress programme in other jurisdictions, which was completed in March 2019. The expert group's report, in addition to the HRB's evidence review, and consultation with other Departments and relevant State agencies will inform the development of proposals regarding the establishment of a compensation scheme, including the need for primary legislation, and work to advance policy development in this regard is under way in the Department.

Question No. 741 answered with Question No. 575.

Health Service Executive

742. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Minister for Health the number of new ventilator units that were allocated to Irish hospitals since 1 January 2021. [61869/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Staff

743. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of recruiting nine additional full-time ICU nurses for Children's Health Ireland, Temple Street. [61870/21]

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

744. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Minister for Health the annual spend in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021 on maternal mental health services at all stages of pregnancy and postnatal care; the allocation of resources and future plans for same.; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61871/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Staff

745. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to a campaign by an organisation (details supplied) which is seeking 100 additional neurology nurse specialists across Ireland, including 17 extra nurses for St. Vincent's University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61873/21]

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

746. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health if occupational services will engage with a person (details supplied). [61916/21]

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. 747 answered with Question No. 739.

Hospital Services

748. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health if he will take steps to ensure essential treatment is expedited for a person (details supplied). [61924/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Health Services

749. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health when funding will be allocated for the health centre in Inis Meáin, Aran Islands, County Galway given the dilapidated state of the health centre including the storeroom; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61928/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Waiting Lists

750. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the length of time a person (details supplied) will be waiting for a long-term stay bed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61930/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Health Services

751. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health the reason a person (details supplied) is unable to get an appointment for their child to see a dietician; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61935/21]

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. 752 answered with Question No. 639.

Health Services Staff

753. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health the number of ophthalmologists contracted by the HSE to deliver primary care services for children in County Louth in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, by location; if no ophthalmologists will be available in Drogheda primary care in the coming weeks given that the existing ophthalmologist is leaving the post and no replacement has been secured; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61972/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Nursing Homes

754. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health his plans to amend the nursing home support scheme to exempt rental income from a principal private residence when calculating the income of an applicant. [61973/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The Nursing Homes Support Scheme (Amendment) Act 2021, which was signed into law on 22 July, introduced further safeguards into the NHSS to further protect the viability and sustainability of family farms and businesses. It also includes an amendment in relation to applying the 3-year cap to the proceeds of sale of a house while a resident is in long-term care. This addresses the first relevant commitment in the *Housing for All* Strategy (action 19.7). This removed a disincentive against the sale of properties that might otherwise remain vacant.

As well as introducing the change above, the Department of Health has also agreed to action 19.8 in the Housing for All Strategy to develop a mechanism in relation to the rental of vacant properties "in a way that is targeted, equitable, evidence-based and provides appropriate safeguards for vulnerable older people". It is important to note that complex policy questions remain in meeting these criteria and there are high risks associated with unintended consequences.

The NHSS is a complex €1.4 billion Scheme that relies on €350m of contributions from over 22,000 residents. It is important to ensure that the costs, benefits, and unintended consequences of any policy changes are fully understood and resolved before they are put in place.

There is no existing exemption of rental or similar income from assessment within the Nursing Homes Support Scheme and due care needs to be taken to ensure that any future changes are appropriate; to protect and meet the needs of residents while also making provision for those in need of housing.

The Department of Health and other government departments continue to collaborate on this policy, including the identification of the number of houses that may be brought into use and the costs associated with the policy options available to address this action, with a view to introducing legislation as soon as possible once this analysis and policy development is complete.

Covid-19 Pandemic

755. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if a risk assessment has been carried out for children aged between 9 to 12 years of age and the effect mask wearing may have on their well-being; if so, the details of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61998/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Government, at its meeting on 30 November, agreed that face masks/coverings be recommended for those aged 9 and over on public transport, in retail and other indoor public settings as currently required for those aged 13 and over, with exemptions as appropriate. Face masks/coverings are also recommended for children in third class and above in primary school and guidance has issued to schools from the Department of Education on this. This guidance can be found online: www.gov.ie/en/publication/d3c55-department-of-education-guidance-on-the-use-of-face-coverings-in-primary-schools/.

It should be noted that this is a temporary, interim measure and will be reviewed in mid-February 2022. The continued importance of other public health measures will continue to be emphasised.

The Government decision is based on a recommendation from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET). The NPHET, at its meeting on 25 November, considered the question of reducing the age at which mask wearing is recommended. This issue has been subject to ongoing review by the NPHET. NPHET consideration has been informed by a number of evidence reviews and advice provided to NPHET by HIQA at NPHET's request since February 2021, informed by research evidence developed by HIQA's COVID-19 Evidence Synthesis Team and with expert input from HIQA's COVID-19 Expert Advisory Group (EAG).

The most recent review by HIQA in August 2021 recommended that the minimum age for mask wearing should remain unchanged, however ongoing monitoring was advised with respect to the epidemiological situation in children.

In light of the sharp rise in the incidence in the 9 to 11 year old age-group in recent weeks the issue was therefore considered again by the NPHET. As part of its deliberations, the NPHET considered previous advice from HIQA, the detailed epidemiological situation in children, international guidance, international practice, the evidence in relation to the use of face coverings in children, and the potential benefits and harms from any recommendations. The NPHET recognised the very significant impacts previous social and economic restrictions have had on families and children to date and also reiterated that a core priority of the NPHET throughout the pandemic has been to protect the continued operation of the education and childcare sector, recognising its importance to the health and development of children. Given the very high

incidence in children the NPHET advised that measures should be taken to interrupt chains of transmission to protect those core priorities. For that reason, the NPHET agreed advice, including the recommendation in relation to mask wearing, to support families and young children in staying safe over the coming period with a view to reducing risk of disease transmission.

HIQA's advice on 'Reducing the minimum age for mask wearing requirements and recommendations in COVID-19' can be found online: www.hiqa.ie/reports-and-publications/health-technology-assessment/reducing-minimum-age-mask-wearing.

Question No. 756 answered with Question No. 589.

Hospital Services

757. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to securing radiology services in Clonakilty or Bandon, County Cork to help alleviate the pressure from hospitals in Cork city; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62007/21]

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.

Agriculture Industry

758. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason his officials have not followed up on their commitment to meet with a farmer (details supplied) with regard to the forced closure of their industry as they had committed to; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61121/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My officials have, at all times, ensured that the person named and indeed all the mink farmers have been briefed and kept up to date on all aspects regarding the cessation of mink farming. Since the last meeting on 15th October 2021, two letters have been issued to the fur farmers and their representatives on 10th and 29th November 2021. In the intervening period, my officials have also been in contact by phone and email.

It is the intention to meet with the mink farmers again when the Regulations are further advanced.

Agriculture Industry

759. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason he has not replied to correspondence from a farmer (detailed supplied) which is of the most serious nature on concerns regarding the forced closure of their business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61123/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The correspondence referred to was received by my office on 18th November and it was acknowledged. All requests for meetings are considered and when a feasible date to hold a meeting is identified this is offered to the requesters.

The current Programme for Government contains a commitment to prohibit fur farming in Ireland and Department officials have been working on appropriate steps to give effect to this. A series of meetings with the fur farm operators and their representatives have been held in this regard. There has also been on-going correspondence and dialogue between the two parties

This particular correspondence is being given detailed attention and will receive a reply shortly.

Agriculture Industry

760. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason his officials are refusing to review the statutory redundancy being offered to staff affected by the closure of the mink farming industry in Ireland despite his own commitment at the Oireachtas Committee hearing on 15 July 2021 to do so; if his officials will be instructed as a matter of urgency to examine what a more appropriate package of redundancy would be; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61124/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Animal Health and Welfare (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2021 that is currently going through the legislative process, will provide for the statutory prohibition of fur farming.

The legislation will make provision for a scheme of compensation for the three farm businesses affected by the prohibition.

Regulations that are being prepared alongside the primary legislation will provide further detail on the compensation provisions. The details of the overall compensation package is receiving detailed attention in my Department.

The farm businesses are to be compensated for certain losses they will experience as part of the prohibition. Compensation for statutory redundancy payments, paid to workers made redundant as a result of the prohibition, is one of the loss categories. Various entitlements for employees are set out in legislation (Redundancy Payments Act 1967) and employees must follow specific redundancy procedures in that regard. Redundancy payments are to be made available by employers when employment is terminated which may be the case when fur farming is prohibited.

The rates and conditions of these payments are defined in the Redundancy legislation and applies to businesses where employment is being terminated. The compensation package that is to be made available to the farm businesses will cover any statutory redundancy payments made but is only one aspect of the compensation to the business owners.

Statutory redundancy payments are the minimum workers are eligible for and will be included in this overall package - the businesses concerned may make increased payments as they consider appropriate.

Agriculture Schemes

761. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of CAP funding for Leader; if consideration is being given to increasing the budget for the Leader Programme 2023-2027; the efforts being undertaken to drive bottom-up community-led investment to create and sustain employment in rural Ireland as per the high-level ambitions of Leader 2023-2027 outlined in the draft CAP strategic plan; and if he will make a statement on

the matter. [61154/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The LEADER Programme is a key rural development tool for supporting the economic and social development of rural communities, by providing the resources necessary for communities to support their own development and create capacity at local level. The budget allocation for LEADER under the previous Rural Development Programme (RDP) for the seven-year period 2014-2020 was €250 million. An additional €70 million was made available for LEADER in 2021 and 2022 under the transitional arrangements that extended the application of the RDP. A further indicative allocation of €180 million for the LEADER Programme is proposed for the 2023-2027 period under the CAP Strategic Plan. Therefore, the total funding for the seven-year period 2021-2027, at €250 million, will be the same as for the period 2014-2020. The allocation for LEADER is part of the overall allocation of funding for the entire CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027.

Agriculture Schemes

762. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if appeals lodged by a person (details supplied) relative to the BPS for 2019, 2020 and 2021 will be expedited and approved; if the power line corridors highlighted on images of their farm holding submitted with the appeals will be included in their claim for benefits; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61185/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The above named applicant submitted application for the years 2019, 2020 and 2021 and payment has issued under each of these scheme years.

However, the applicant's agent requested a review of certain parcels that were claimed in these applications. This review is currently ongoing and will be completed shortly. Once completed, the applicant will be informed of the outcome and any additional payments that may be due will be processed.

Control of Horses

763. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of the horse project for Cork city. [61204/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) is fully committed to supporting sustainable, One Health, One Welfare initiatives in line with the Programme for Government and *Working Together for Animal Welfare*, Ireland's Animal Welfare Strategy 2021-2025.

In this context, DAFM supported three equine education modules with funding of almost €20,000 provided to the Urban Horse Projects in 2016, and is open to supporting further "One Health, One Welfare" projects country wide.

The Cork City Horse Project is a collaborative initiative involving Cork City and County Councils and community stakeholders including the Traveller Visibility Group, and is a continuation of the Horse Forum which dates from 2011. The Department continues to participate in the group's meetings where, in recent years, efforts have been focused on finding suitable space to locate a Horse Project within the Cork City boundaries.

The Department would very much welcome a submission from the project, through Cork City Council for assistance under our Urban Horse Projects scheme once a suitable location has been established in the City.

Live Exports

764. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department has adopted a strategy in advance of the position adopted by the European Parliament ANIT committee (Committee of Inquiry into the Protection of Animals During Transport) which in effect would stop live exports of calves under 35 days old and prevent the transport of in-calf cows domestically in their third trimester being discussed at the Farm Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61209/21]

765. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department will conduct a full impact assessment of the effect proposals (details supplied) would have on Irish agriculture, in particular, in terms of impact on the dairying and beef sectors, the loss of critical markets for live exports and the potential for creating unanticipated animal welfare problems domestically; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61210/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 764 and 765 together.

As the Deputy is probably aware, the European Parliament's ANIT Committee has concluded its work and has voted on its report and recommendations. The recommendations of the ANIT Committee, if they were to be implemented in full, would be particularly challenging. This report will next be presented to a plenary session of the European Parliament in January, seeking endorsement by the Parliament.

The European Commission is currently reviewing European animal welfare legislation including the rules for the transport of animals. This review by the Commission will result in legislative proposals, which are expected in 2023.

It can be expected that the report of the ANIT Committee will feed into this review. The Commission has repeatedly said however that legislative proposals will be made on the basis of the best available scientific evidence, and it is vital that this will be the case.

My Department will continue to engage with this process to communicate the challenges that these recommendations will place on Irish farmers. Teagasc is currently engaged in research in relation to the welfare of animals being transported and the outcome of this scientific research will help to inform the debate in this area.

It is essential, however, that stakeholders in the Irish agriculture sector take note of these findings. Societal attitudes to animal welfare and the welfare of animals during transport is continually evolving.

It is important that stakeholders further advance their collaborative efforts to ensure the welfare of all animals transported, mitigate the risk of any sector being overly dependent on live exports and to continue to develop strategies that support the transition to a sustainable dairy-beef sector.

The export of animals is strictly regulated by my Department in accordance with existing EU law and the Irish system of controls is publicly acknowledged to have incorporated additional meaningful measures that ensure high standards of animal welfare on farm, and at every

stage during transport.

I am committed to retaining the live export market as it is an integral part of the dairy and beef sectors and exports play a key role in driving competition.

Question No. 765 answered with Question No. 764.

Forestry Sector

766. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the rationale for the transfer of €7 million in capital expenditure from the forestry budget; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61234/21]

767. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to ensure that the €7 million in capital expenditure intended to be moved from the forestry budget is spent on community and small-scale tree-planting initiatives for National Tree Week 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61235/21]

771. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the €7 million being returned from the forestry budget is a result of the inability of his Department to deliver afforestation licences to the sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61438/21]

772. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the forestry sector will be allocated financial support to repair plantations damaged by late spring frost in recent years given the fact that €7 million in capital spending is being moved from the forestry budget; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61439/21]

782. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he considered enhancing or broadening available supports for those effected by ash dieback when reallocating funds within the recent supplementary estimate; if not, if other forestry related measures were considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61468/21]

784. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine further to Parliamentary Question No. 743 of 30 November 2021, his views on assessing a case for a frost recon scheme which has been ongoing since 2019; the reason his Department has not utilised the €7 million unused forestry budget for the frost recon scheme to support forest owners whose forests have been damaged by frost; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61514/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 766, 767, 771, 772, 782 and 784 together.

It is standard accounting practice that towards the end of a fiscal year spending Divisions within the Department will review their commitments for the remainder of the year and release funds that are not committed nor are unlikely to be committed.

The funds released will be disbursed for other commitments across my Department. There remains sufficient funds in the forestry allocation to pay this year's commitments across all afforestation and support schemes, including the ash dieback scheme.

The Department has no plans to expand the ash dieback scheme at present but will continue to keep it under close review.

This underspend in forestry arose because new planting in 2021 was less than anticipated and this is a matter of concern to me. It appears at this stage that the number of hectares of new afforestation, which we calculate as forestry in respect of which a first grant and premium has been paid, will be somewhere in the region of 2,000 hectares. This is despite over 4,000 hectares licensed and approved.

There are 5,000 hectares of approved forestry licences issued and ready for use. I encourage anyone with a valid afforestation licence to plant their land, thereby accessing generous annual premiums and 100% establishment grants.

Along with Minister of State Pippa Hackett, who has overall responsibility for the sector, we accept that delays in issuing afforestation licences may be a contributory factor in terms of low levels of planting and we are addressing these licensing delays through Project Woodland. As regards afforestation, outputs are not where I'd like them to be but there are signs of improvement. My Department is prioritising the assessment of afforestation licences on hand, using the same system as was applied to felling licences, which yielded good results.

Ten Ecologists are now dedicated to afforestation, with more to be recruited. In addition to recruiting new staff I am also reallocating existing Administrative, Forestry Inspectorate and Ecology resources to afforestation licensing files. I expect these changes to result in a higher level of output of afforestation licences than before.

On the matter of community and small scale tree-planting, the Deputy may be aware that we have a Neighbourhood Scheme which supports close-to-home woodland amenities for public use and enjoyment, and that we are seeking to amend the Forestry Act 2014 to increase small-scale native tree planting without the need for an afforestation licence. In terms of the frost reconstitution scheme, I understand Minister Pippa Hackett, who has direct responsibility for forestry, discussed recently with stakeholders and the matter is under consideration.

With over €100 million provided for in the forestry budget for 2022, I am satisfied that there are sufficient funds to fully support increased afforestation and all other forestry related schemes in 2022.

Question No. 767 answered with Question No. 766.

Forestry Sector

768. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his attention has been drawn to the fact that an application before the Forest Service by persons (details supplied) submitted on 20 October 2020 is still awaiting a decision and is being delayed by the NPWS which apparently has no wildlife ranger in place to provide a report; the action he is taking to deal with the delay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61323/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): An application for the Afforestation Grant and Premium Scheme was submitted on behalf of the persons named in October, 2020. The application was referred to the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS).

As the site is partly within a designated site, the Department is obliged to seek specific approval from NPWS. This approval is currently awaited and we have issued another reminder to the NPWS to give us their opinion as it is overdue.

Common Fisheries Policy

769. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when he plans to establish the proposed stakeholders forum to review the Common Fisheries Policy from an Irish perspective; the number of members he plans to place on the forum; the criteria that will be set in place to become a member; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61333/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): EU Regulation 1380/2013 (the basic Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) regulation), sets down that the European Commission will report to the European Parliament and the Council on the functioning of the CFP by the end of 2022.

I have made it clear, most recently during the Commissioner's recent visit, that the CFP must take stock of the disproportionate impacts imposed on the Irish fishing industry by Brexit and the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA). I continue to keep the focus on the disproportionate quota reductions for Ireland under the TCA and to use any opportunity available to seek constructive solutions that would help to alleviate this unacceptable position, including keeping a strong focus on the matter within the Fisheries Council. I am fully committed to doing all possible through the CFP review to secure additional quota where possible for Irish fishers.

The Commission published a proposal on 6 July proposing an amendment to extend the derogation for access to EU Member States 12 miles zones up until the end of December 2032. It also removed the provisions relating to access for the UK, which are now covered in the TCA. I consider that this important element of the CFP should be dealt with the by the Commission as part of the full CFP review and form part of the formal review and the Commission report to Council and Parliament on the functioning of the CFP. I have written to the Commissioner to make Ireland's concern and our position clear.

It is expected that all stakeholders will have an opportunity to engage actively in the Commission's review over the coming period, including the fishing industry, eNGOs and Member States. However, the European Commission has not yet published details of the review process or how Member States and stakeholders will engage in this process. Once we have a clear picture of the process and timelines of the review, I will finalise details of how Ireland will participate actively and effectively in the review of the CFP, including the interaction with stakeholders, to prepare Ireland's case and identify priorities. In that regard, I intend to nominate the key stakeholders to participate in a stakeholder forum.

Animal Diseases

770. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the obligations placed on farmers to facilitate TB inspections in the event that a farmer has demonstrated two clear test results in one year and in which neighbouring herds have already tested clear; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61353/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The current requirement in place under EU and national legislation, and that has been in place since the 1960s, is that all herds undergo at least one annual herd screening test.

In herds where disease is suspected or confirmed, this will result in extra tests until my Department officials are satisfied that all relevant TB measures specific to that herd / area have

been fulfilled.

Further risk-based TB tests are also deployed as an effective means of finding disease and thus preventing onward spread of undetected infections.

For example, in 2020 contiguous tests - those on herds that are at the time unrestricted but situated close to currently infected herds - were 4.7 times more likely to be positive than routine screening tests. Herds that have been recently derestricted must carry out additional risk-based tests in the period after they go clear, which are dependent on the risk level of their breakdown. This reflects the fact that these herds have a higher risk of breakdown that other herds.

The reasons for TB in certain herds and areas are multi-factorial and require a range of measures to address the issue, which may include contiguous programmes, gamma interferon blood testing, cleansing and disinfection, other risk-based TB tests, and isolation of reactors. Each TB outbreak is investigated by a veterinary inspector to identify the source of infection.

Earlier this year, I launched the new Bovine TB Eradication Strategy 2021-2030. TB levels in 2021 are likely to be lower than in 2020. This will be the first annual decrease in TB since levels starting rising in 2016. Herd incidence in the 12 months to 5th December 2021 was 4.31% compared to 4.37% on the corresponding date last year, and the number of reactors in the 12 months to 5th December 2021 was 20,752, compared to 22,782 on the corresponding date last year, a decrease of over 2,000 reactors. This is evidence that the new policies implemented under the TB strategy, supported by the TB Forum, are starting to have an effect.

I am acutely aware of the financial and emotional burden that is placed on a family farm as a consequence of a herd breakdown. I am committed to driving down TB rates and I believe we are in a position to make positive inroads.

Question No. 771 answered with Question No. 766.

Question No. 772 answered with Question No. 766.

Forestry Sector

773. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to ensure afforestation is complementary within the next CAP to re-engage farmers in forestry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61440/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): As set out in the Climate Action Plan, the Government will continue to promote afforestation to increase planting to a rate consistent with realising our 2030 climate ambition and to contribute to achieving carbon neutrality no later than 2050. To achieve this, my Department fully recognises the need for afforestation to be complimentary to CAP.

As set out in the Programme for Government, this Government is committed to a new national Forestry Programme. This new Forestry Programme will aim to highlight to farmers that forestry can represent a valuable and complementary income stream to an active farming enterprise.

The new Forestry Programme will again be funded nationally and will be subject to State Aid approval by the European Commission.

There will be close alignment between the CAP and the new national Forestry Programme.

Significant tree planting measures are proposed under both the annual Eco-Scheme and the multi-annual Agri-Environment Climate Measure for the next CAP. In addition, agricultural land with an agricultural activity, that is afforested under the next CAP will continue to qualify for Direct Payments. This will include payment under the Basic Income Support Scheme and the Eco-Scheme.

To further encourage farmers to consider afforestation, it is proposed that forestry land it will be allocated an appropriate weighting so it will also count towards a farmer's "Space for Nature" requirement under both Conditionality and the Eco-Scheme.

The new Forestry Programme and the new CAP will provide opportunities to further align agricultural support schemes and forestry, to better integrate planting into the farming system, and to remove any barriers to uptake.

Forestry Sector

774. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of afforestation licences issued and the number of Coillte felling licences issued since the assistant secretary of his Department informed the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine on 29 January 2020 that afforestation needs to be the clear focus for 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61441/21]

775. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the way the Forestry Service within his Department plans to reach its own planting afforestation target given it only issued 49 afforestation planting licences in a five-week period from 1 to 29 October 2021 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61442/21]

778. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the current weekly and monthly number of Coillte felling, private felling, road and afforestation licences issued by type; if a more ambitious target will be adopted in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61464/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 774, 775 and 778 together.

Tackling the backlog in forestry licenses remains a key priority for my Department and I am pleased to report the significant progress has been made in the past year, particularly on felling and road licences. Since that Oireachtas Committee meeting on 29th January to 10th December, my Department has issued a total of 447 afforestation licences for an area of just over 3,700ha, as well as 1,298 Coillte felling licences, 1,207 private felling licences, and 583 forest road licences.

Along with Minister of State Pippa Hackett, who has overall responsibility for the sector, we accept that in terms of afforestation, outputs are not where I'd like them to be but there are signs of improvement.

My Department is prioritising the assessment of afforestation licences on hand, using the same system as was applied to felling licences. Ten ecologists are now dedicated to afforestation, with more to be recruited. In addition to recruiting new staff I am also reallocating existing Administrative, Forestry Inspectorate and Ecology resources to afforestation licensing files. I expect these changes to result in a higher level of output of afforestation licences than before.

Improvements in afforestation licences should help encourage more planting. However,

there are 5,000 hectares of approved forestry licences issued and ready for use. I would encourage anyone with a valid afforestation licence to plant their land, thereby accessing generous annual premiums and 100% establishment grants.

As regards recent licensing output, in the last 14 weeks, we have issued on average 118 licences per week.

A monthly breakdown of licences issued YTD is in the table below.

-	Private Felling	Coillte Felling	Total Felling	Afforestation	Forest Roads
January	98	179	277	36	45
February	54	109	163	48	67
March	47	51	98	56	67
April	64	25	89	73	42
May	103	73	176	48	79
June	220	91	311	39	61
July	73	59	132	12	21
August	66	72	138	18	40
September	258	267	525	34	36
October	149	225	374	43	51
November	123	230	353	50	93
December*	50	96	146	26	27
Totals	1,305	1,477	2,782	483	629

* to 10th December - total issued 3,894

We will reach this year's target of 4,000 licences and my Department is currently working on projections across all licence categories for 2022, which will be published before year end. This will be a more ambitious target.

We will build on this year's momentum in 2022 and will implement any and all practical process improvements which result from the review and analysis in train under Project Woodland. I remain fully committed to delivering a licensing system which meets the needs of farmers and other land owners who wish to plant trees, as well as delivering for the wider forestry sector and society as a whole

Question No. 775 answered with Question No. 774.

Forestry Sector

776. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine further to Parliamentary Question No. 291 of 20 October 2021, if the afforestation scheme is classed as an environmental scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61443/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The afforestation scheme under the Forestry Programme 2014 - 2020 provides a range of multi-functional benefits which contribute to our national economic, environmental, recreational and societal objectives. The afforestation scheme provide for funding for different types of forests including productive forests, agroforestry, forestry for fibre, and native woodland establishment.

It has, of course, strong environmental credentials and is part of the Government's direct response to our national environmental priorities through its inclusion for example in the Climate Action Plan 2021. It is for this reason that we are planning for a renewed National Forestry Programme to replace the current version and which is currently under development along with a new national Strategy for Forestry to 2050.

Agriculture Schemes

777. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason for the non-payment of farm payments in September 2021 to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61446/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): EU Regulations governing the administration of Basic Payment/Areas of Natural Constraint Schemes require that full and comprehensive administrative checks, including in some cases remote sensing (e.g. satellite inspections), are completed before any payments issue.

The 2021 application of the person named was selected for a remote sensing eligibility inspection. This required verification of the position on the ground by means of a field visit which is now complete.

The application of the person named is currently being processed. The inspection results, along with any queries identified, will be communicated to the farmer concerned as soon as they are available. Any payments due to the applicant will issue as soon as this process is complete.

Question No. 778 answered with Question No. 774.

Forestry Sector

779. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he plans to introduce a statutory period in which applicants for forestry-related licences will be entitled to receive a decision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61465/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Deputy will be aware of Project Woodland, which is tasked with improving the forestry licensing system and the creation of shared vision for forestry into the future.

In terms of licensing, an important initiative is the in-depth review of the forestry licensing system being carried out by a consultant with legal and environmental expertise.

It will review the existing statutory framework for the licensing of forestry activities in relation to environmental and public participation obligations in order that practical advice can be provided to the Department on how to work more efficiently within the existing legal framework.

As part of this review the question of a statutory timelines for the issuing of decision on licences will be considered. That report is expected at end February next.

We continue to work towards delivering licences in an acceptable timeframe and we have in recent months seen improvements in licence delivery and a reduction in the backlog. It is my intention that we will build on this momentum in 2022 so that we can meet the needs of applicants for forestry licences and of the wider forestry sector and society as a whole.

Forestry Sector

780. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the period of activity for which already issued licences will meet the demand of Coillte; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61466/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In March this year, my Department received a batch application of some 1,800 licences from Coillte. These applications were for their clear fell programme for 2022 and 2023.

Coillte has now received nearly 90% of their licensing requirement for 2022 and I understand they recently held their contract event, where sawmills received half of their supply of logs from the company for 2022.

To 10th December 2021, a total of 2,782 tree felling licences at a volume of 7.9 million cubic metres have issued. The Coillte/private tree felling breakdown is 1,477 Coillte and 1,305 private. This is 60% higher than last year and the highest volume ever licensed in a single year. This increased supply of licences to industry over the past 12 months has allowed processors to rebuild their inventories, putting them in a much better position to respond to fluctuating demand from customers.

We are committed to sustaining and building on this momentum in 2022 and to continue supporting the sawmilling and timber processing sector which is such an important part of our rural economy.

Forestry Sector

781. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he plans to allocate further ecologists and foresters towards the processing of farmer and private individual afforestation applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61467/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Tackling the backlog in forestry licenses remains a key priority for my Department and I am pleased to report significant progress has been made in the past year, particularly on felling and road licences.

The investment in resources and continual improvement has had a positive impact with a significant increase in licence output in recent months. This has brought our output to 3,894 licences issued to date this year. I am confident that we will meet our target of 4,000 licences by year end which will be a 60% increase on last year.

In terms of afforestation, outputs are not where I'd like them to be but there are signs of improvement. My Department is prioritising the assessment of afforestation licences on hand, using the same system as was applied to felling licences. Ten ecologists are now dedicated to afforestation, with more to be recruited. A tender has issued last week for additional ecological services to assist my Department. In addition to recruiting new staff, I am also reallocating existing Administrative, Forestry Inspectorate and Ecology resources to afforestation licensing files. I expect these changes to result in a higher level of output of afforestation licences than before.

We will build on this year's momentum in 2022 and will implement any and all practical process improvements which result from the review and analysis in train under Project Woodland. I remain fully committed to delivering a licensing system which meets the needs of farm-

ers and other land owners who wish to plant trees, as well as delivering for the wider forestry sector and society as a whole.

Question No. 782 answered with Question No. 766.

Agriculture Schemes

783. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the introduction of an equine census that includes donkeys will cease with the need to forward passports for donkeys to his Department for the purposes of the ANC scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61507/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In keeping with my commitment to review and enhance the equine identification and tracing system, as set out in Ireland's Animal Welfare Strategy 2021-2025, I initiated the undertaking of the first annual equine census in November 2021.

The initial purpose of the census is to establish a link between each equine kept in the State and the premises on which it is kept on census date. The information submitted will provide important information in the event of an equine disease outbreak, in addressing public health concerns and in dealing with lost, straying or stolen horses.

This census data will be built on in 2022, when I propose to provide equine keepers with limited access to my Department's Animal identification and Movement (AIM) system, which houses the central equine database, allowing them to notify the Department directly when an equine moves residence. This will facilitate compliance with the EU Animal Health Law requirement to record the habitual residence of all equines on the central equine database.

It is expected that the linking of each equine to its place of residence will further enhance compliance with equine legislation where equine keepers are responsible for the health and welfare of all equines in their care.

With the introduction of the equine census, my Department is considering how the information that will now be gathered through both the equine census and the AIM system from 2022 can support the livestock checks that are a necessary requirement of the Areas of Natural Constraints (ANC) scheme.

Question No. 784 answered with Question No. 766.

Forestry Sector

785. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if statistical information in relation to felling licences will be provided for 2020 and to date in 2021 (details supplied). [61652/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department is the consent authority for tree felling licences, which are a legal requirement before the felling of any tree or trees. In the years in question, my Department issued 1,717 (2020) and 2,711 tree felling licences. These are broken down by county and whether they are issued to Coillte Teo or private landowners in the tables below.

Tree felling licences issue with varying validity periods up to and including 10 years. After

the expiration of the validity period, a landowner has two years in which to replant the felled site. Therefore, no reforestation inspections would be carried out on tree felling licences issued in 2020 and 2021 as they would be within the timeframe by which the replanting is required to take place. Information on ad hoc inspections is not compiled centrally and therefore not readily available, as they usually arise from complaints received by letter, email or by phone call. All such complaints are followed-up, with action taken as appropriate.

Every application for a forestry licence, including tree felling licences is assessed for its potential impact on the surrounding countryside and environment. This examination – Appropriate Assessment (AA) Procedures – is in the following stages AA screening, followed by stage 2 AA where required. Where following AA screening the potential impacts cannot be readily excluded, the application goes for stage 2 AA. The number of tree felling licence applications that progressed to stage 2 AA will be forwarded to the Deputy under separate cover.

Felling licences issued by count in 2020 and 2021 for both Coillte and Private landowners

2020	Private	Coillte	2021	Private	Coillte
Carlow	5	11	Carlow	11	21
Cavan	38	35	Cavan	45	34
Clare	54	66	Clare	92	78
Cork	97	106	Cork	159	166
Donegal	6	54	Donegal	30	141
Dublin	3	7	Dublin	2	14
Galway	54	64	Galway	46	111
Kerry	61	31	Kerry	85	56
Kildare	4	6	Kildare	26	4
Kilkenny	43	40	Kilkenny	57	35
Laois	14	64	Laois	50	52
Leitrim	54	41	Leitrim	61	58
Limerick	29	28	Limerick	64	36
Longford	18	5	Longford	23	3
Louth	0	6	Louth	4	7
Mayo	36	21	Mayo	64	63
Meath	5	2	Meath	25	5
Monaghan	17	7	Monaghan	11	2
Offaly	32	25	Offaly	68	23
Roscommon	82	15	Roscommon	67	29
Sligo	41	14	Sligo	47	44
Tipperary	39	71	Tipperary	90	189
Waterford	31	45	Waterford	45	104
Westmeath	7	11	Westmeath	18	6
Wexford	29	18	Wexford	19	21
Wicklow	53	72	Wicklow	41	159

Fishing Industry

786. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the

Marine the share of the fish quota in the Irish EEZ under the CFP for the Irish fishing fleet on a species basis in tabular form; the overall share or percentage of the fish quota in the Irish EEZ under the CFP allocated to the Irish fishing fleet; and the overall share and percentage of the fish quota in the Irish EEZ under the CFP allocated to the fishing fleet of all other EU member states on a member basis. [61668/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Under the Common Fisheries Policy, EU fishing fleets are given equal access to EU waters and fishing grounds subject to allocated fish quotas and the rules of the CFP. There are restrictions on access within the 12 nautical miles zones of Member States including Ireland.

Quotas for the various stocks are allocated for management areas - that is, ICES areas, rather than Member States' EEZs. For example, the Total allowable Catch (TAC) area for the Hake Stock is ICES Areas 6 and 7 which stretches from the north of Scotland south to the north coast of Brittany, and into the English channel. This area includes parts of the UK EEZ, the Irish EEZ, part of the French EEZ and some international waters. Ireland's quota may be fished in any part of this area. Ireland's main mackerel quota covers ICES Areas 6 and 7 stretching from north of Scotland to the north coast of Brittany and the full quota may be fished in UK waters of the northern North Sea. The access to the northern North Sea in particular is economically important for our fleet.

In relation to Ireland's 200 miles zone, the outtake has been estimated by the Marine Institute. It has estimated the landings from the Irish EEZ for the top 25 species over the period from 2015 to 2019. The tables at the following link show that, overall, Irish vessels take 35.5% (by weight) and 38.8% (by value) of the landings from the Irish EEZ. The data sets for 2020 and 2021 are not available yet.

[Irish Fishing Fleet]

The total value of Ireland's fish quotas for 2021 is approximately €229 million.

Nitrates Usage

787. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if there are supports available from his Department for farmers who wish to use organic fertilisers or fertiliser pellets that are biologically composted and 100% organic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61721/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The application of fertilisers to land is regulated by the Nitrates regulations SI 605 2017. These regulations provide for the use of organic fertilisers as well as chemical fertilisers to growing crops when ground and weather conditions allow. Certified analysis of any fertiliser used should be available to farmers so that they can optimize the use of nutrients.

There are currently no supports available for the use of fertiliser . Support through capital aid scheme or TAMS are available to farmers for the purchase of low emission slurry spreading equipment and GPS enabled fertilizer spreaders.

The use of organic fertilisers in 2022 will be particularly cost effective for farmers in light of the current price of chemical fertilisers.

Live Exports

788. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of animal deaths and injuries that occurred on the voyage of a livestock vessel (details supplied); if a vet was on board the vessel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61748/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department only permits animals to be transported in compliance with the legislation. Department officials and inspectors monitor compliance through a system of official controls, including advance checks of paperwork and veterinary checks, of the livestock vessel, and of all animals before they travel, along with retrospective checks on GPS and temperature records.

In the case of the voyage referred to, the operator provided Department officials with a Masters Report following the completion of the journey. That report indicates that there were no mortalities on board, and that twelve animals were treated for ailments over the course of the voyage. The report further indicates that all animals responded to treatment.

There was no official veterinary presence on board for this voyage - the resurgence of COVID-19 in Ireland and throughout Europe has made such accompaniment hazardous. It is planned to resume such accompaniments once it is deemed safe, and to meet the commitment outlined our Programme for Government.

Live Exports

789. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the proportion of livestock vessels leaving Ireland in 2020 and to date in 2021 that had a vet on board; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61750/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department only permits animals to be transported in compliance with the legislation. Department officials and inspectors monitor compliance through a system of official controls, including advance checks of paperwork and veterinary checks, of the livestock vessel and of all animals before they travel, along with retrospective checks on GPS and temperature records. In general, animals travel well and arrive in good condition.

There were nine voyages of dedicated livestock vessels departing from Ireland during 2020 and four to-date during 2021. Of those, an official veterinarian accompanied one voyage during 2020 and one voyage during 2021. The resurgence of COVID-19 in Ireland and throughout Europe during 2021 has made such accompaniment challenging. It is planned to resume such accompaniments once it is deemed safe, and to meet the commitment outlined our Programme for Government.

My Department is conscious of the need to ensure the welfare of the animals in transit and, as the regulator in this area, we are satisfied that the systems in place in respect of the intra-community movement and extra-community movement of these animals are supportive of the welfare of the animals and in compliance with the relevant legislation. The Department continues to monitor and enforce compliance, to ensure the welfare of animals transported.

Forestry Sector

790. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a farmer in receipt of, and who has repaid, subsidies for land (details supplied) must apply for a felling licence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61752/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Any person who wishes to fell a tree or trees must first apply for and be granted a tree felling licence in accordance with the Forestry Act, 2014. This is irrespective of whether the forestry was in receipt of grant aid and if that grant aid has been refunded on the sale of land.

It is an offence to fell a tree or trees without first obtaining a tree felling licence.

Greyhound Industry

791. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a detailed breakdown of expenditure of the €1.76 million spent by Rásaíocht Con Éireann on welfare, laboratory, integrity and governance will be provided in tabular form. [61835/21]

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.

As part of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund in Budget 2020, €16.8m was allocated to Rásaíocht Con Éireann (RCÉ) in accordance with Section 12 of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act, 2001.

It was stipulated as part of the parameters and conditions of the funding that a minimum of 10% of the total fund was to be spent on welfare measures including integrity.

RCÉ has informed my Department that it has spent in excess of the required 10% on welfare and integrity from the Horse and Greyhound Fund and has spent a total of €3.18m, including spend on welfare and integrity from its own income, as set out in tabular form below.

Welfare, Integrity, Racing Regulation, Laboratory & Governance

Item	Value	Comments
Payroll & Travel	1,047,401	Control Stewarts, Stipendiary Stewarts, Welfare Officers, Testing Teams etc
Control Committee	39,135	
Laboratory	309,473	
Testing Consumables & DNA	32,791	
I.R.G.T. & Welfare	129,261	
Veterinary	188,504	
	1,746,565	
Greyhound Care Fund		
COVID19 Welfare Payment	994,176	
COVID19 Trial & Litter Supports	12,694	

Item	Value	Comments
Contribution to Welfare Initiatives	184,677	I.R.G.T., Care Centre, Injury Support Scheme, Rehoming cost etc.
	1,191,547	
Traceability & Scanning Project	247,800	Capital outlay for system development
Welfare Including Integrity Total	3,185,912	

Greyhound Industry

792. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the recently purchased greyhound utility vehicles are available for use at official and unofficial trials; and if they will be available at all racetracks. [61836/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Rásaíocht Con Éireann (RCÉ) is a commercial state body, established under the Greyhound Industry Act, 1958 chiefly to control greyhound racing and to improve and develop the greyhound industry. RCÉ is a body corporate and a separate legal entity to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

The question raised by the Deputy is an operational matter for RCÉ and, therefore, the question has been referred to the body for direct reply.

Greyhound Industry

793. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of death certificates submitted to the welfare department of Rásaíocht Con Éireann since the new code of practice for the care and welfare of greyhounds came into force. [61837/21]

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.

Animal Breeding

794. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of veterinary certificates that have been lodged with an organisation (details supplied) in 2020 to allow for a greyhound bitch to have a seventh and-or eighth litter; and if a list of said greyhound bitches will be provided. [61838/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The

Irish Coursing Club (ICC) is the organisation charged with the role of Keeper of the Irish Stud Book since 1923. The stud book records pedigrees, ownerships, breeding data and transfers of ownership primarily of all greyhounds. The ICC is subject to the general control and direction of Rásaíocht Con Éireann.

The ICC has informed this Department that there were 24 litters whelped in 2020 (18 on their seventh litter and six on their eighth litter) for which they received a veterinary certificate. Further information relating to these dogs is available from the Irish Coursing Club.

Greyhound Industry

795. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the detail of the regulatory changes that took effect in February 2021 regarding the manner in which novice greyhounds are seeded. [61839/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Rásaíocht Con Éireann (RCÉ) is a commercial state body, established under the Greyhound Industry Act, 1958 chiefly to control greyhound racing and to improve and develop the greyhound industry. RCÉ is a body corporate and a separate legal entity to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

The question raised by the Deputy is an operational matter for RCÉ and, therefore, the question has been referred to the body for direct reply.

Greyhound Industry

796. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if information on the traceability system RCÉTS is publicly accessible; if not, the reason; and the number of owners and keepers who have failed to update the status of their greyhound on the RCÉTS since January 2021. [61840/21]

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.

Control of Dogs

797. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the microchip database of an organisation (details supplied) records the unique identifying code of the person who implants the microchip and registers the dog; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the recent seizure of 33 dogs by An Garda Síochána and another organisation were registered on the pet sellers list as billionaire bully and online adverts listed by the pet seller indicates that the dogs were registered with the first organisation; and if a commitment will be given to investigate if the dogs were in fact legally registered. [61841/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Microchipping of Dogs Regulations, 2015 includes the requirement to record the unique identifying code of the person who implants the microchip and registers the dog. Information available to my Department indicates that the microchip database referred to records this information in compliance with the regulation.

As the seizure of the animals referred to is the subject of a Garda investigation, it would be inappropriate to comment further at this time.

Agriculture Schemes

798. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his proposals to incentivise and support poultry farmers to invest in and adopt best available technology in order to reduce ammonia emissions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61879/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department is committed to the reduction of ammonia emissions and, to this end, published the Code of Good Agricultural Practice for Reducing Ammonia Emissions from Agriculture on 12th January 2021.

There are a wide variety of items available under the suite of seven measures under TAMS which help with the reduction of ammonia emissions. Support for poultry farmers is provided under the Young Farmers Capitals Investment Scheme, and the Pig and Poultry Scheme measures under TAMS.

High concentrations of ammonia in poultry houses should be avoided, thereby minimising negative impacts on bird health and performance. Good flock management practices are a factor in controlling ammonia concentrations, including stocking density and diet management and temperature adjustments in the houses.

Controlling the ventilation rate is crucial. When ammonia levels increase, more ventilation is needed.

Accordingly, measures to help reduce ammonia emissions include ventilation fans and control system for free range layer house and broiler houses and drinker systems. Additionally, grant aid for the provision of energy efficient upgrades to buildings is a significant contributor to the control and reduction of ammonia levels in and emissions from poultry houses. Details of all grant-aided investments are available on my Department's website.

To date, total expenditure under the seven measures of TAMS, including transitional expenditure, has exceeded €325million with commitments of an additional €145million made to scheme participants who have yet to draw down those grants. Some 45,595 applications have been approved under the scheme. A total of €1.7 million has been paid to date to 168 Poultry farmers under TAMS II. No changes to the TAMS eligibility and technical criteria involved are being proposed at this time.

The On-Farm Capital investment scheme, as is the case with all proposals under the CAP Strategic Plan (CSP), is in the process of development and is subject to the formal approval of the European Commission. The public consultation on the Environmental Assessment of the draft CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 closed on 8th December 2021, and I will be reviewing the proposal in advance of the submission of the proposal to the Commission by 1st January 2022.

Agriculture Schemes

799. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine further to Parliamentary Question No. 355 of 20 May 2021, the amount of funding provided to pillar 2 schemes from the Exchequer; the amount co-funded by scheme in 2020 to date; the allocated amounts in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61880/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): As a result of my Department's recent technical supplementary estimate and the ongoing management of financial resources**,** €669m has now been allocated to Pillar II schemes and €529m spent to date in 2021, with the remaining €140m expected to issue in December.

EAFRD funding claimed from the European Union on expenditure incurred from January 2021 to 15 October 2021, amounts to €160m (excluding Leader) with a further claim to be submitted for the last quarter, which will be reimbursed in 2022.

The definitive 2022 allocation will be set out in the 2022 Revised Estimates Volume (REV) which will be published later this year. I have asked my officials to forward the 2021 definitive figures to the Deputy when they have been finalised in 2022.

Agriculture Schemes

800. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount of funding he plans to provide to pillar 2 schemes from the Exchequer; the amount co-funded from 2023 to 2027; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61881/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): A total of €2.3 billion in national exchequer funding will be made available for the 2023-2027 CAP Strategic Plan. When combined with Ireland's €1.56 billion in Pillar II funding arising from last year's agreement on the EU budget, this will bring the allocation for Rural Development measures to a total of €3.86 billion over the five year period.

In addition, residual spending of approximately €350m will occur under the existing Rural Development Programme in the period 2023-2025 including LEADER. The exact amount will depend on the expenditure of schemes in 2021 and 2022. The breakdown between national and the co-funded element will depend on the residual spending profiles as there are different EU funding rates including the European Recovery Instrument Funding is at 100% and will only become clearer as the programme progresses.

Agriculture Schemes

801. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the proposed cap of €66,000 on the basic income support scheme will impact on eco-scheme payments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61882/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The CAP Strategic Plan Regulation contains a number of particular requirements for all EU Member States in relation to the redistribution of direct payments.

In that context, I am proposing to implement capping of direct payments at €66,000 by making full use of the flexibility in the regulation where payments between €60,000 and €100,000

can be reduced by 85% giving an effective cap of €66,000. I fought very hard in Europe to ensure that we had a capping of payments that brought greater fairness to the system. This capping will only apply to the Basic Income Support for Sustainability (BISS) under the next CAP. It, therefore. has no impact on Eco-Schemes payments.

Eco-Schemes themselves are being proposed for the first time as part of the next CAP and they must be funded from within Pillar I of the CAP budget. I have decided to allocate 25% of Ireland's Direct Payments envelope to the Eco-Scheme annually, which equates to approximately €297 million per annum.

Agriculture Schemes

802. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount paid in pillar 1 payments to date in 2021; the total amount expected to be paid; the amount allocated in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61883/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Total CAP Pillar 1 payments for the year 2021 to date were €1.131 billion. This includes €777.5 million under 2021 Basic Payment, €340.7 million under Greening, €10.1 million under the 2021 Young Farmers Scheme and €2.7 million under the 2021 Protein Scheme. Processing of applications is continuing and further payments are being made as more applicants reply to outstanding queries and cases are resolved.

The amount allocated to the Basic Payment ceiling in 2022 is €1.186 billion. This is the gross amount and does not take into account any Financial Discipline that may be incurred.

Agriculture Schemes

803. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of sheep on which payments were made under the sheep welfare scheme; the payment rate in each of the years 2016 to date, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61906/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The number of sheep that have received payment under the scheme for each of the scheme years since Year 1 of the scheme commenced in February 2017 is set out in the following table.

Scheme Year	Number of eligible breeding ewes receiving payment
2017	1,890,130
2018	1,771,078
2019	1,724,087
2020	1,693,943
2021	1,848,077 *

* This figure is based on payments to date, which commenced in November 2021 with advanced payments under 2021 Sheep Welfare Scheme. The final number of eligible breeding ewes on which payment will be made will reflect additional payments to be made up to and including the issue of balancing payments in Q2 2022, as well as the incorporation of the 2021 census process and any other changes in participant's flock sizes notified to my Department during the scheme year. It should also be noted that the 2021 figures reflects the change to the

reference year, bringing the reference year to the higher of either the farmers' existing reference number or their 2017 sheep census return. For those who joined as new entrants, the reference year is being updated to 2019.

The payment rate in each of the years 2016 to date was €10 per eligible breeding ewe.

Agriculture Schemes

804. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the indicative allocation for a sheep improvement scheme within the proposed CAP Strategic Plan intends an equal allocation of funds across all five years of the plan; the estimated number of individual breeding ewes this would support in each year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61907/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I am committed to the long-term viability of the sheep sector and the dedicated sheep farmers who produce a world-class product. The Sheep Improvement Scheme aims to build on the progress made by the Sheep Welfare Scheme (SWS) in the 2014-2020 RDP by providing support for actions that improve animal health and welfare in the sheep sector.

The programme budget will be allocated equally across each year of the scheme. However, it should be noted that the draft scheme is based on an annual contract which will be demand-led, as was the case with the Sheep Welfare Scheme, which means the drawdown can be variable. It is projected that the measure can support up to 1.67 million breeding ewes annually.

Agriculture Schemes

805. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of dairy farmers receiving less than €10,000 in pillar 1 payments for the years 2016 to date by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61908/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The information requested by the Deputy is currently being prepared and will be forwarded directly to the Deputy when it is available.

Agriculture Industry

806. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of dairy farmers with a family farm income of less than €20,000, by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61910/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Teagasc's National Farm Survey is carried out on an annual basis on a representative sample of farms to cover all farm enterprises with a standard output of greater than €8,000. The NFS represents 93,244 farms nationally but does not provide a breakdown of results by county.

According to the Teagasc National Farm Survey (NFS) 2020, there were 16,074 dairy farms in 2020.

1,888 (12%) of these dairy farms had a family farm income (FFI) less than €20,000. This

data is broken down at NUTS II level as follows: 252 in the Eastern and Midland region (13% of dairy farms in that region); 362 in the northern and western region (15%); and 1,274 in the southern region (11%). The average FFI on all dairy farms is estimated to have increased by 28% in 2021, to around €95,000, up from €74,200 in 2020. This increase is due to the combination of a 16% increase in milk prices and a 6% increase in milk production in 2021.

Fishing Industry

807. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will extend the hours of landing at the designated piers and harbours in the State for fishing vessels registered in Northern Ireland to weekends. [61911/21]

808. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason he has not added Dunmore East to the list of designated piers and harbours in the State that can facilitate the landing of fishing vessels registered in Northern Ireland considering the presence of the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority officials at the harbour. [61912/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 807 and 808 together.

I am actively considering in consultation with the Sea Fisheries Protection Agency, the designation of Dunmore East for direct landings by fishing vessels from Third Countries and the designation of Malin Head for landings of Northern Ireland vessels.

I am also actively considering an extension to the existing opening hours of Rathmullen, Greencastle and Burtonport.

Question No. 808 answered with Question No. 807.

Calafoirt agus Céanna

809. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den Aire Talmhaíochta, Bia agus Mara an bhfuil an tuarascáil dheireannach ar a rabhthas ag fanacht maidir le Céibh Ros an Mhíl faighte; má tá, cén toradh a bhí ar an tuarascáil agus cén uair atá i gceist chun cinneadh a dheánamh maidir le forbairt céibhe doimhne mara ann, ag tógáil san áireamh an phráinn a bhaineann leis seo de bharr nach bhfuil ach achar reasúnta gairid fágtha ag an gcead pleanála don fhorbairt. [61920/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Tá an Tuarascáil Anailís Costais is Tairbhe a bhaineann le tionscadal na Cé Doimhne faighte agam agus tá scrúdú á dhéanamh ag Oifigigh i mo Roinn ar an tuarascáil seo faoi láthair, scrúdú a mbeidh ról lárnach aige sa chinneadh a dhéanfar maidir le maoiniú a chur ar fáil le haghaidh tionscadal dá leithéid.

Tá cóip den tuarascáil seo le fáil ar shuíomh gréasáin na Roinne ag an nasc seo a leanas: www.gov.ie/en/publication/be00f-fishery-harbours/#rossaveel-ros-an-mhil-fishery-harbour-centre-and-cashla-bay.

Ina theannta sin, le deireanas fuair mé cóip de thuarascáil a choimisiúnaigh Údarás na Gaeltachta ina sainaithnítear Ros an Mhíl mar phríomhshuíomh chun mol straitéiseach a bhunú ann chun tacú leis an earnáil gaoithe eischósta snámha. Tá beartais Rialtais éagsúla le cur san áireamh anseo agus ní mór breithniú cuimsitheach a dhéanamh ar na ceisteanna beartais agus

ar na riachtanais infheistíochta.

Go deimhin, tá tuarascáil an Údaráis tráthúil ó tharla go bhfuil tuarascáil faighte agam freisin ón Tascfhórsa Bia Mara ina leagtar béim shuntasach ar dheiseanna a chruthú do phobail iascaireachta na hÉireann chun tionchar an chaillteanais rochtana ar uiscí na Ríochta Aonaithe a sheach-chur tríd an gComhaontú Trádála & Comhair idir an Ríocht Aontaithe agus an tAontas Eorpach.

É sin ráite, táim airdeallach ar an bpointe gurb é príomhról agus príomhfheidhm na gCalafort Iascaigh tacú leis an tionscal bia mara. Beidh sé riachtanach go gcuirfear san áireamh, in aon chinneadh a dhéanfar amach anseo tús a chur le tionscadal na Cé Doimhne in Ros an Mhíl, aon mhaoiniú Státchiste a bheidh ar fáil agus tosaíochtaí náisiúnta iomaíocha.

Common Agricultural Policy

810. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the way the reformed Common Agricultural Policy and in particular the draft CAP strategic plan will focus on the necessity for rewarding greenhouse gas efficiency and reductions on individual farms; the way such gains will be protected within the overall agricultural emissions targets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61993/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): As the Deputy is probably aware, we are currently finalising the preparation of our CAP Strategic Plan (CSP), which will be submitted to the Commission for approval by the end of the year. The plan contains a comprehensive set of schemes which will lead to reductions in absolute greenhouse gas emissions, with significant co-benefits for air, water quality and biodiversity. Central to the CSP is protecting and enhancing farm incomes.

The Suckler Carbon Efficiency Scheme (SCES) will build on significant investments made to date under the Beef Data Genomics Programme (BDGP). Suckler beef farmers will be financially rewarded for participating in the scheme, which will not only improve GHG efficiencies, it will also reduce absolute GHG emissions over time, making a contribution to the sector's overall 22-30% GHG reduction target by 2030. Breeding low emitting animals will become a priority for this decade, and the Suckler scheme will support this objective. Crucially, participants will receive €150 on the first 10 cows and €120 on all remaining cows. This is significantly up on the BDGP which paid €90/cow on the first 10 in the herd and €80 thereafter.

Funding under Pillar II has been increased by over €900m in order to roll out a host of new schemes that will financially reward farmers to continue to play a leadership role in tackling climate change and addressing biodiversity and water quality. The new agri-environmental scheme under Pillar II will pay up to a maximum of €10,000/farmer. There will be a move towards rewarding farmers for results-based outcomes, which will clearly contribute to overall environmental objectives.

Under Pillar I, the Eco-Scheme measures offer a range of farmer-friendly options to participate while also having environmental benefits.

My Department is also committed to the concept of carbon farming, a key part of current EU agriculture policy.

A working group has been established which, taking account of developments at EU level, will bring forward a plan for establishing a pilot scheme.

Carbon farming has significant potential to establish alternative funding streams for Irish agriculture, working closely with voluntary carbon markets, to provide financial incentives to underpin the necessary changes in farm management. I am genuinely excited and enthused about the potential of this area and I will push it forward.

I have also established a soil carbon observatory and a soil sampling programme which will help to establish carbon baselines at individual farm levels. This will position Irish farmers to take advantage of carbon farming as the decade progresses.

Harbours and Piers

811. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development further to Parliamentary Question No. 1040 of 10 February 2021, the status of development of the pier on Inis Oírr; when she expects the works to be completed; the cost of the project to date; the estimated total cost of the project; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61116/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy is aware, Galway County Council are the responsible authority for the maintenance and development of infrastructure on the Aran islands. To that end, my Department provides financial support to the local authorities for priority projects.

To address safety issues affecting the pier on Inis Oírr, the Government included development of the harbour among the capital projects identified in the Ireland 2040 National Development Plan. A steering committee consisting of representatives from my Department, Galway County Council and the Consulting Engineers was established and has been meeting regularly to monitor progress.

The Department has approved the business case for the development of the pier and Galway County Council is in the process of resolving a number of pre-construction issues prior to issuing a draft tender for the development. These pre-construction issues include preparing the CPO applications and the application for a foreshore licence for the works on the island.

Subject to the pre-construction issues being finalized, a preliminary timetable has been discussed by the development committee providing for a tendering process of approximately 9 months, after which construction will advance in stages. The finalised plan is likely to take a number of years to complete, taking into account weather and sea conditions.

The cost to date of the Inis Oírr pier development since the commencement of the project in 2004 is €978,713.59. The estimated cost of the project at present, barring any unforeseen circumstances that may arise, is approximately €20m.

Rural Schemes

812. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development further to Parliamentary Question No. 32 of 14 October 2021, the status of the promised €2 million scheme to fund the development of town masterplans; the details of the scheme; the selection criteria for the scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61117/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): On 9 December last I announced €2.6 million in funding to deliver Town Centre First Plans in 26 towns across the country. The development of these 26 Plans will feed into the Government's

overall Town Centre First Policy, which I expect will be launched in the coming weeks.

The funding will support each local authority, working with a collaborative Town Team, to develop a be-spoke Town Centre First plan to guide the development of each town. As part of the initiative, each local authority will be provided with €100,000 to support the development of a unique vision for the town which will also outline specific interventions required to deliver on this vision.

The Town Centre First Plans should be guided by a strong empirical base and be developed collaboratively with local Town Teams involving community and business, as well as public and private stakeholders. It is envisaged that the Plans will cover the importance of "place-making", town centre living, and the social and economic purpose of the town. They should respond to emerging opportunities such as those linked to remote working, climate action and digitalisation. The Plans will also be central to addressing vacancy and dereliction in these locations.

In addition to developing the plan, the funding can be used to cover any underlying analysis that must be undertaken to inform the development of the plan, capacity building required locally for the Town Team, or the initial delivery of some small interventions in the town, where the budget allows.

The towns were selected based on submissions from the local authorities. Local authorities were requested to identify not more than three towns with a population of up to 10,000 people that are located outside of the 5 city metropolitan areas. One town was then selected by my Department in each county based mainly on the priority indicated by each local authority.

Regeneration Projects

813. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development further to Parliamentary Question No. 69 of 14 October 2021, the status of the report on the town centre first approach; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61131/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Town Centre First policy is a commitment under the Programme for Government, and in *Our Rural Future* and *Housing For All.* My Department and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage have jointly been developing the policy which is now finalised. The policy will be launched in the coming weeks.

The new Town Centre First Policy will be an important catalyst for Local Authorities and local stakeholders to plan for, and deliver, revitalisation in their towns. To support this, and in advance of the announcement of the Town Centre First policy, I announced €2.6m of funding last week for the delivery of Town Centre First Plans in 26 towns. I also secured funding of €2 million in Budget 2022 for Town Regeneration Officers who will support the roll-out of the Town Centre First policy nationally.

Flexible Work Practices

814. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the position regarding developing and expanding of enterprise hubs remote working hub infrastructure in rural Ireland, particularly in County Wicklow; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61142/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): *Our*

Rural Future, Ireland's Rural Development Policy 2021-2025*,* recognises the opportunity for rural rejuvenation that remote working presents and commits to establishing a comprehensive and integrated network of remote working hubs over the lifetime of the policy to 2025.

A number of funding streams operated by my Department directly support this commitment. For example, the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund and the Town and Village Renewal Scheme both support the establishment of new digital hubs. Under this year's schemes, projects that bring vacant properties in town centres back into use as remote working hubs were eligible to apply for funding. Projects that repurpose existing community or publicly owned buildings in town or village centres to facilitate remote working were also eligible.

In addition, earlier this year I awarded almost €9 million in funding through the Connected Hubs funding stream to add capacity to remote working infrastructure in digital hubs and broadband connection points throughout the country. Details of successful applications, including those in County Wicklow, are available on my Department's website.

In May I launched the National Connected Hubs network together with the connected-hubs.ie platform. The platform offers a suite of booking and hub management applications to members of the Network. There are currently 170 hubs live on the platform, with this number growing on an ongoing basis. Table 1 (attached) provides the number of remote working hubs onboarded onto the platform to date by county, together with remote working hubs that have been mapped and are invited to join the National Connected Hubs Network.

TABLE 1 - NATIONAL HUBS NETWORK STATUS

County	Live on the connected-hubs.ie platform	Mapped and invited to join the connectedhubs.ie platform
Carlow	4	3
Cavan	3	6
Clare	10	7
Cork	13	18
Donegal	11	11
Dublin	27	38
Galway	16	27
Kerry	13	13
Kildare	3	7
Kilkenny	1	5
Laois	4	5
Leitrim	7	14
Limerick	10	11
Longford	2	3
Louth	3	7
Mayo	11	21
Meath	0	12
Monaghan	6	3
Offaly	4	10
Roscommon	4	14
Sligo	3	9
Tipperary	4	21

County	Live on the connected-hubs.ie platform	Mapped and invited to join the connectedhubs.ie platform
Waterford	4	8
Westmeath	0	8
Wexford	5	9
Wicklow	2	4
TOTAL	170	294

The development of a national hubs network is a key commitment in *Our Rural Future* and I am committed to continuing my Department's support for the development of remote working hubs in recognition of the vital role that they can play in our post-Covid recovery.

Agriculture Schemes

815. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of her Department's engagement with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in finalising funding for LEADER; the efforts being to maximise the budget for LEADER as part of the CAP strategic plan; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61155/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The LEADER Programme is one of the key interventions of Our Rural Future, the Government's Policy for rural development launched earlier this year.

An indicative budget of €180 million was recently announced for the LEADER programme for the period 2023-2027. When taken together with the €70 million already provided for 2021 and 2022 under the Transitional LEADER Programme, a total of €250 million will be made available for the 2021 - 2027 period, thus maintaining the level of funding provided for the 2014-2020 programming period. The maintenance of the €250m funding allocation will underpin the continued contribution of the LEADER approach in delivering on the Government's vision for Rural Ireland.

Preparations for the design and delivery of the next LEADER programme from 2023-2027 are well underway. This includes an independent review of the delivery structures of the current programme, which is nearing completion. This review will draw on the experience of all stakeholders in the 2014 to 2020 LEADER programme and help to underpin effective scheme design for the new LEADER programme.

My officials are engaging with stakeholders on an ongoing basis on the design of the next LEADER programme. They are also working closely with colleagues from the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine and the EU Commission, in developing the next CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027, which LEADER will form part of.

The ongoing engagement and consultation with stakeholders combined with the funding allocation indicated will ensure that the LEADER programme from 2023 will continue to support and further develop our rural communities and businesses.

Industrial Relations

816. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will establish a collective bargaining forum to negotiate pay and conditions of em-

ployment across the community and voluntary sector; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61170/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): The mission of my Department is to promote rural and community development and to support vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland.

Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities - A five year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland 2019-2024, reaffirms the Government's commitment to supporting the community and voluntary sector as a whole and addressing some of the burdens faced by service providers, whilst also recognising the reality of finite resources and the need to ensure that available resources are focused on providing effective services.

My Department has no role in setting the terms and conditions, including pay, of workers, which are internal matters for the relevant organisations. Whilst the Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities strategy commits to scoping and developing a sustainable funding model for the sector, there are no commitments in relation to the terms and conditions of such staff which remain a matter for their employer, nor in relation to the establishment of a collective bargaining forum for the sector.

Community Development Projects

817. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the budget allocation for the community enhancement programme for 2020 and 2021; and the budget allocation for same in 2022, in tabular form. [61278/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): The Community Enhancement Programme (CEP) was first launched by my Department in 2018. It provides small grants to community organisations with a focus on those organisations in disadvantaged areas. The funding is provided to each Local Authority area and is distributed by the Local Community Development Committees (LCDC) in that area on the basis of local need. Since 2018 the CEP has funded in excess of 12,000 projects/organisations across the country.

As set out in the table below,

- In 2020 , the CEP received total funding of €7.2m, including €5m received as part of the Government's July stimulus package for repairs or upgrades to community centres and community facilities.

- I launched the 2021 CEP on the 10th May with an allocation of €4.5m. The key theme of this year's programme is supporting groups as they re-open facilities which were closed due to COVID-19.

- In November I launched the Community Activities Fund (CA-Fund) administered under the Community Enhancement Programme with funding of €9m. This fund will support groups, particularly in disadvantaged areas, with operating costs such as utility and insurance bills, as well as funding to carry out necessary repairs and improvements to their facilities. It will also provide small grants for capital projects or equipment.

- It is planned to run the CEP again in 2022 with an allocation of €4.5m.

Year	2020	2021	2022
CEP funding	€7.2m	€13.5m	€4.5m

Rural Schemes

818. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development further to Parliamentary Questions Nos. 9, 15 and 21 of 14 April 2011 and 1267 of 2 November 2021, the funding for the LEADER programme during the 2007 to 2013 period; the reason for the discrepancy between the replies; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61476/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): From 2007 to 2020, LEADER was included in the suite of measures that constituted Ireland's Rural Development Programme (RDP). The Rural Development Programmes agreed by each Member State with the EU Commission were designed to correspond to specified Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) programming periods. The CAP programming periods in turn correspond to the EU's budgetary cycle. The Rural Development Programme (RDP) will now be replaced by each Member State's CAP Strategic Plan.

As part of the 2007 to 2013 CAP programming period, LEADER was included as a number of linked measures under Axis 4 of the RDP. The original amount of funding that was made available to LEADER under that Rural Development Programme was approximately €425m.

Initially, €400m was allocated to the Local Action Groups (LAGs) for project funding and administration with €25m being withheld for future distribution. The LEADER programme evolves over the course of the 7 year period and, depending on the circumstances, can be amended with the agreement of the EU Commission.

In 2013, due to the downturn in the national economy and following an amendment to the RDP which was negotiated with the European Commission, the allocations to the LAGs were revised resulting in a change in the co-financing rate and a decrease in the overall programme allocation. The revised allocations to the LAGs amounted to approximately €327m. In some instances, the reduced level of funding was insufficient to meet the commitments of the LAGs and additional national exchequer funding in the region of €47m was approved to meet these commitments. Additional funding for the food sector of €3m was also approved. In total, €377m was made available for the period 2007 to 2013.

The final spend achieved by the LAGs up to the end of December 2015 was approximately €366m.

In the 2024-2020 RDP a total allocation of €250m was available for LEADER, and this allocation has been maintained for the 2021-2027 period.

Tionscadail Fhorbartha Pobail

819. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den Aire Forbartha Tuaithe agus Pobail cén dul chun cinn atá déanta le measúnú a dhéanamh ar iarratas faoin gClár Seirbhísí Pobail (sonraí tugtha); agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [61510/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): I láthair na huaire, tugann an Clár Seirbhísí Pobail (CSP), á riaradh ag Pobal thar ceann mo Roinnse, tacaíocht do bhreis agus 420 eagraíocht phobail chun seirbhísí áitiúla a chur ar fáil trí mhúnla fiontraíochta sóisialta.

Chun bheith incháilithe, ní mór d'eagraíochtaí a bheith ina bhfiontair shóisialta a bhfuil sé de chumas acu ioncam a ghineadh óna gcuid gníomhaíochtaí d'fhonn costais iomlána thuarastail na bpost a dtacaítear leo a íoc, mar shampla, ó ioncam ó úsáid phoiblí saoráidí agus seirbhísí.

Sa bhliain 2020, thug Indecon International Economic Consultants faoi athbhreithniú neamhspleách ar an gClár Seirbhísí Pobail thar ceann mo Roinnse. Foilsíodh an tuarascáil deiridh ar an 30 Meán Fómhair 2020 agus bhí Plean Gníomhaíochta Ardleibhéil ag gabháil léi inar leagadh amach an amlíne maidir le cur i bhfeidhm céimnithe um athstruchtúrú an chláir.

I láthair na huaire, tá mo Roinnse agus Pobal, a riarann an clár thar ceann na Roinne, ag obair ar athstruchtúrú an chláir i gcomhar le Grúpa Comhairleach, ina bhfuil baill ó phríomhpháirtithe leasmhara ón earnáil lena n-áirítear eagraíochtaí a thacaíonn CSP leo, eagraíochtaí náisiúnta, ionadaithe pobail agus ionadaithe fiontair sóisialta.

Go dtí go n-aistreofar chuig an gclár nua athstruchtúrtha, ní ghlacfar le hiarratais nua ar an scéim trí phróiseas an léirithe spéise.

Tabhair ar aird nár chuir an eagraíocht atá faoi thrácht léiriú spéise faoi bhráid na Roinne sular dhún an próiseas iarratais i mí Mheán Fómhair 2020.

É sin ráite, táthar ag súil go n-osclóidh an Clár glaonna chun aghaidh a thabhairt ar bhearnaí aitheanta i seachadadh na seirbhíse le linn 2022. Dá mba mhaith leis an eagraíocht go gcoimeádfaí a cuid sonraí teagmhála ar taifead laistigh den Roinn, rachaimid i dteagmháil nuair a osclóidh an glao spriocdhírithe in 2022. Is féidir sonraí teagmhála a chur ar fáil don Roinn ar csp@drcd.gov.ie

Departmental Budgets

820. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development further to Parliamentary Question No. 100 of 7 December 2021, the implications for her Department of the plan to use deferred surrender of funds; if the funds surrendered will be lost permanently to her Department; the amount that is likely to be involved; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61599/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy is aware, the Finance Act 2004 makes provision for Departments and agencies to carry forward capital money from the current financial year into the next financial year. This recognises the difficulties inherent in the planning and profiling of capital expenditure, and that such projects may be subject to delays.

Given the closure of construction sites for most of the first half of the year, in line with public health requirements, such delays were inevitable this year. I therefore decided to fully utilize this deferred surrender provision and will be carrying forward 10% of the Departments capital budget from 2021 to 2022. This amounts to €16.86 million in capital funding.

These funds are not lost, but are now available for use in 2022, where the funds will be used to further support capital schemes in the rural and community development programme areas. The use of this deferred surrender will ensure that the resources provided to my Department in 2021 are put to best use, and that the funds can be used to invest in rural areas and our communities in 2022.

Rural Schemes

821. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she has received a full written report in relation to a matter (details supplied); the up-to-date position; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61632/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Local Improvement Scheme (LIS) supports the improvement of rural roads and laneways that are not normally maintained by local authorities and represent a vital piece of infrastructure for rural communities.

As noted in my previous reply in respect of the matter raised by the Deputy, I asked my officials to request a written report from the relevant Local Authority in respect of the road in question.

Further details in respect of this matter have been provided to my Department by the relevant Local Authority. The material received references a number of engineering constraints linked to the proposed works. I have asked my officials to provide this further information to the Deputy under separate cover, and I will also arrange for this matter to be further reviewed by an Inspector from my Department.

Community Employment Drug Rehabilitation Projects

822. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the details of responses from her Department to the issues faced by areas of Tallaght, Dublin 24 that have been adversely impacted by the growth in crack cocaine usage; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [61857/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): I have been made aware of the issue raised by the Deputy.

There is unfortunately a growing trend in the community of an increased drug culture among those most marginalised that has seen many young people become involved in drug use, drug dealing and negative life choices.

While recognising that a multi-faceted approach is required to address these issues, my Department is playing its part by providing funding for a Detached Street Worker in the area in question that will engage the most at risk, marginalised young people, aged between 10-24yrs, on the streets rather than in a conventional youth work setting.

The Detached Street Worker will connect with the most vulnerable young people and support them to engage with the most relevant local services to address their needs.

My Department also provides €2.45m under SICAP to the South Dublin County Partnership Company, via South Dublin LCDC. This funds staff in the company to deliver supports to people in the area who are most in need.

My officials continue to work with other departments and with South Dublin County Council and South Dublin County Partnership to build a collaborative relationship with relevant agencies and Departments with aim of securing additional resources to further enhance the supports currently provided.