

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 10, inclusive, answered orally.

Passport Services

11. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the measures that are being taken to address the issue of lengthy processing times for first-time passport applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3904/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Passport Service is currently experiencing high demand for first time passports.

In order to protect the integrity of the Irish passport, when processing a first time application, the Passport Service must validate the identity of the applicant and confirm their entitlement to Irish citizenship.

In the case of first time passport applications for children, the consent of guardians must also be checked. This ensures that the Passport Service protects the rights of the child and their guardians.

Due to the rigorous checking process in place, the processing time for first time applications is currently 40 working days. This compares to 10 working days for simple adult online renewals and 15 working days for complex and child online renewals.

When passport applicants do not provide all of the required documentation to the Passport Service, unfortunately, it can take much longer to process the application and issue a passport. There are currently 73,000 first time applications on hand with the Passport Service. Of these, 32,000 or 43% are incomplete applications. In these cases, the onus is on the applicants to submit required documentation to complete the application so that their passport can be issued. The experience of the Passport Service is that it can take weeks and sometimes months to receive the necessary documents after an applicant applies online.

It is a priority for the Passport Service to improve processing times for first time applicants in 2022. The ongoing staff recruitment drive and upskilling of existing staff will greatly assist with this. There are also a number of system and website improvements being implemented that will help to enhance customer experience.

Given the level of demand expected by the Passport Service this year, I urge anyone who intends to travel in 2022 to apply online now for their passports.

Brexit Issues

12. Deputy Neale Richmond asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on his most recent conversation with the UK Foreign Secretary; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3073/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): On 6 January, I met with the UK Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, Elizabeth Truss, M.P. This followed calls between us in October and December last year. We discussed the ongoing EU-UK discussions on the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, bilateral relations, developments in Northern Ireland and current foreign policy priorities.

With regard to the ongoing EU-UK discussions, I emphasised that Ireland and the EU remain fully committed to providing certainty and stability for people and business in Northern Ireland. I noted that the Protocol is the joint EU-UK solution to mitigate against the disruption Brexit causes for citizens and businesses on the island of Ireland and that it can work if we allow it to, with flexibility and pragmatism. As you will know, Commission Vice President Šefcovic and Foreign Secretary Truss held meetings on 13-14 January, and earlier this week on 24 January.

With reference to the wider context, I raised my ongoing commitment to work towards strengthening bilateral relations post-Brexit and suggested approaches to consider. We discussed the importance of intensifying inter-parliamentary links and ongoing collaboration in key sectors.

With regard to developments in Northern Ireland, I spoke in favour of a partnership approach between our governments based on the Good Friday Agreement. I also outlined the Government's consistent position in relation to legacy and the importance of a collective approach to find an agreed way forward on this most sensitive of issues.

We also discussed our ongoing cooperation on the UN Security Council, as well as a range of global and foreign policy issues, including developments in Ukraine.

Question No. 13 answered orally.

Northern Ireland

14. Deputy Matt Shanahan asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on the successes and benefits of the Reconciliation Fund; if the projects that have been identified to promote reconciliation and help to create better understanding and relations between persons and traditions on the island of Ireland and between Ireland and Britain have been successful; the way he can reconcile the potential successes of these projects with the continuing talk of Brexit and a future Border poll; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3854/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department's Reconciliation Fund was established in 1982 to support civil society organisations in creating a better understanding between people and traditions on the island of Ireland, and between Ireland and Britain. The Fund has supported over 3,000 projects with more than €60 million in grant funding since its establishment.

In spring 2021, I approved a new strategy for the Reconciliation Fund for the period 2021-2024, to ensure that the Fund continues to support our vision of a reconciled Ireland and remains relevant, effective, and efficient over the coming years, particularly given the difficult

contexts of Brexit and COVID-19. To support implementation of this ambitious new strategy, I have also increased the Reconciliation Fund budget, with grants awarded in 2022 expected to reach €5.0m, up from a budget of €3.7m in 2020.

I am satisfied that the Reconciliation Fund continues to make a vital and effective contribution to peace on these islands through its support for reconciliation based projects in a range of sectoral and geographic areas.

To ensure that maximum benefit is achieved with available financial resources, applications undergo a rigorous assessment stage, including consideration by an Interdepartmental Consultative Committee, to ensure that those projects with greatest potential impact and strongest alignment to the criteria of the Fund, are supported. Formal written reporting is required on completion of projects. The impact of projects is also assessed through engagement with funded organisations and on-site monitoring visits.

Formal reporting and the feedback we get on the ground at community and political levels (as well as via our annual Reconciliation Networking Forum), indicate that our grants are effective in fulfilling the objectives of the Fund.

I recognise that Brexit has led to more civic discussion and debate about constitutional change, and I believe that the Reconciliation Fund has an important role to play in supporting initiatives in this area, by funding opportunities for research and inclusive dialogue which aim to foster greater mutual understanding and sustainable North-South links.

Overseas Development Aid

15. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which Ireland continues to respond to the needs of poorer communities, often beset by war, famine and national disasters; the extent to which membership of the United Nations Security Council can be used as a means of accelerating help that is needed in such challenging situations; the extent to which Ireland continues to promote assistance through the bilateral aid or multilateral aid programmes; the extent to which such activity has increased in recent times; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3878/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland's international development policy, *A Better World*, published in 2019, guides Ireland's humanitarian and development responses to those in need, in particular those affected by war, famine and other disasters.

In the 2020 peer review of Ireland's development cooperation programme, the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) highlighted Ireland as "an excellent humanitarian partner", with its funding models "useful inspiration for other DAC donors". Ireland is also consistently found to be the most principled donor by the respected international thinktank ODI, in particular for our focus on those furthest behind.

Since taking up our seat on the UN Security Council last year, Ireland has consistently called for full respect of human rights and international humanitarian law, and unhindered humanitarian access to all those in need. Last year, Ireland and Norway successfully led negotiations on the renewal of the critical Syria humanitarian cross-border resolution. It ensured that life-saving humanitarian aid was able to continue to reach 3.4 million Syrian men, women and children in the northwest of the country.

We have also worked hard to ensure that the Security Council's attention is focused on the humanitarian and human rights situations in many parts of the world. Security Council atten-

tion to such situations as Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Myanmar and Yemen will remain a priority throughout the rest of our term.

My Department is implementing a comprehensive approach to our work in conflict-affected settings. This uses our development cooperation assistance, our political engagement and partnerships, and our membership of the UN Security Council to deliver for those in greatest need. This approach ensures that humanitarian, development and peace activities are coordinated under common objectives, and it puts “lasting peace” for affected communities at the centre of all our actions.

Decisions about the channels for the delivery of aid, be it bilateral or multilateral, are informed by the circumstances and context of a given crisis or development need. The United Nations system and the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent are important partners given their ability to respond. Amongst OECD countries, Ireland allocates one of the highest percentages of our development assistance to NGOs, while Ireland’s partner countries in Africa and elsewhere are an expression of our bilateral solidarity.

Diplomatic Representation

16. Deputy Cathal Crowe asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on his Department’s efforts to open an embassy in Tehran, Iran. [3568/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): In 2021 the government decided to re-establish an Irish diplomatic presence in Iran in two phases. The first phase began in August 2021 with the appointment of a Chargé d’Affaires in Tehran, with the Irish diplomatic mission co-located in the German Embassy in Tehran. The Irish Embassy in Ankara remains accredited to Iran.

The second phase will involve the re-opening of a full Embassy in Tehran with a resident Irish Ambassador in 2023 and planning is already underway for this.

Overseas Development Aid

17. Deputy Emer Higgins asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the funding provided by his Department in 2021 to civil society organisations working in the area of overseas development aid. [3637/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Both Ireland’s Foreign Policy for a Changing World, Global Island, and ‘Ireland’s Strategy for Africa to 2022 acknowledge the importance of sustaining the work of civil society organisations and the vital role they play in building peaceful, inclusive and prosperous societies.

In addition, A Better World, Ireland’s policy for international development published in 2019, recognises the importance of civil society in supporting development, human rights and in the delivery of humanitarian assistance and protection. It reiterates Ireland’s strong commitment to supporting and protecting civil society space. It also commits to strengthening collaboration with Irish civil society partners on public engagement and outreach.

My Department publishes a report annually on Ireland’s Official Development Assistance (ODA) programme, known as Irish Aid, and these are available on the website. The reports include statistical information on programme expenditure showing the distribution of aid, including the total amounts given to civil society organisations.

With regard to figures for 2021, validation of data on Ireland's ODA programme is done in arrears. Prior to publication, draft statistical returns are shared with the relevant OECD Development Assistance Committee experts for assurance that Ireland's reported spending meets the internationally accepted criteria of what can be counted as ODA. This assurance is important to maintaining Ireland's reputation as a quality donor. The 2021 Report will be published later this year.

Ireland is amongst the OECD donors which provide the greatest percentage of bilateral assistance to civil society organisations, typically around double the OECD average. The 2020 OECD DAC Peer Review of Ireland found that "Ireland's partnerships with civil society are particularly strong and are characterised by mutual trust, quality funding based on clear criteria and an open culture for substantive, regular dialogue". It also found that Ireland is a global leader in promoting civil society space and that our partnerships with civil society are a hallmark of our development co-operation.

Overseas Development Aid

18. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the work his Department is undertaking to combat gender-based violence overseas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3643/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): A Better World, the Government's policy for international development, establishes gender equality as a policy priority. Globally, gender-based violence has increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions.

Ireland is among OECD countries with the highest annual proportion of official development assistance (ODA) invested in gender equality measures, including the reduction of gender-based violence.

Ireland funds initiatives to this end through Irish and international NGOs, the UN and through our country programmes, mostly in Africa. In 2021, my Department, through the Irish Aid programme, committed approximately €15 million annually to address gender based violence. This includes partnerships with the International Rescue Committee, and the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women, which supports grassroots efforts in over 80 countries. The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) is a longstanding partner of Ireland's. They address gender based violence by providing sexual and reproductive health services, explicitly combating harmful practices such as genital mutilation and child marriage. Irish Aid's support for education for girls also helps keeps girls safe.

My Department is also a member of the Irish Consortium on Gender Based Violence. The Consortium facilitates advocacy, learning and capacity building of Irish NGOs to respond to GBV.

In recent years, my Department has supported work to prevent and respond to gender-based violence in a large number of countries, including Palestine, Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Liberia, Vietnam, Zimbabwe and Zambia. For example, in Zimbabwe, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown contributed to a 75% increase in demand for services for women suffering from gender based violence. In response, Ireland supported Oxfam to scale up services to respond to domestic violence and advocate for women's rights. This provided support for 1,500 individuals per month, and doubled the capacity of shelters.

Gender features as a theme of the 2020 Irish Aid Annual report, which contains more infor-

mation on this issue.

Human Rights

19. Deputy Peadar Tóibín asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his attention has been drawn to an issue reported in a newspaper (details supplied) that indicated there is an exchange between the United Nations Human Rights Council and Chinese diplomats of information on Uighur dissidents as revealed by a person. [60078/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): 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.

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 is a strong advocate, 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 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.

On 21 October 2021, 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.

Foreign Policy

20. Deputy Richard Bruton asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will update Dáil Éireann on the situation in Afghanistan in terms of the humanitarian crisis and the evacuation of persons at risk. [3859/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Afghanistan is now the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. Nearly 23 million Afghans face acute food insecurity. The UN launched its largest ever humanitarian funding appeal on 11 January seeking approximately \$5 billion to meet the immense needs within Afghanistan and of Afghan refugees in the region.

A donor-pledging conference on Afghanistan is likely to take place in March and Ireland will participate. In 2021, our humanitarian funding to Afghanistan increased fivefold to over €5.3 million for UN agencies and NGOs. Last year, the EU and Member States allocated more than €1 billion in funding to UN agencies and NGOs working in Afghanistan for humanitarian aid and to support basic needs. The EU also established a humanitarian air bridge that delivered 280 tonnes of lifesaving supplies.

Ireland supports all initiatives to alleviate the suffering of the Afghan people. At the UN Security Council, we actively engaged in negotiations to ensure a clear and robust humanitarian carve out to the sanctions regime against the Taliban to ensure the delivery of essential humanitarian aid to the population. The resolution was adopted in December.

A total of 108 Irish citizens and their dependents have been assisted in evacuating Afghanistan since August.

My Department, including our Embassies in Abu Dhabi and Ankara, has worked with EU Member States and partners in the region to support ongoing evacuation efforts.

Work continues to support the small number of Irish citizens and their dependents, less than 10, as well as residents, who remain in Afghanistan and wish to leave in the coming period.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth administers the Irish Refugee Protection Programme. Over 500 Afghan nationals have been granted refugee status under this Programme, with 418 having arrived safely to Ireland. My Department has provided support, including through our Embassy network, in securing safe passage to Ireland for a number of these.

International Agreements

21. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs further to Parliamentary Question No. 52 of 30 September 2021, if his Department has undertaken an assessment of Ireland's possible accession to the Antarctic Treaty System; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3634/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I updated the House on the question of Ireland's accession to the Antarctic Treaty System on 30 September 2021. I was also pleased to participate in the Seanad debate on the Antarctic Treaty System on 8 December 2021, and to provide a further update at that time.

As I noted, the Department of Foreign Affairs has tasked a number of Embassies accredited to countries of comparable size with seeking insights from those countries about their accession to the Antarctic Treaty, including in terms of the legislative, policy and administrative requirements, and the ongoing requirements of membership. The Department has also requested its Embassies in a number of countries with a common law system to gather detailed information on the measures taken to implement the ATS there.

Separately, the Department has prepared detailed Terms of Reference for an analysis to be carried out of the range of legislative, policy and administrative measures required at domestic level in order to accede to the Antarctic Treaty System. A request for tenders for this analysis exercise issued on 24 January. Individuals with relevant credentials and expertise in the field have been sourced and identified, to be invited to submit a proposal to complete this analysis by early March.

This detailed analysis will form the basis for subsequent work with relevant Government Departments. Any specific legislative proposals arising from the assessment would be submitted for approval in the ordinary way, prior to accession.

Passport Services

22. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of applications for passports from residents of Dublin city and county that are currently outstanding; the planning that is being carried out to ensure that there is no repeat of the delays with applications experienced in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3694/22]

32. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of applications for passports from counties Cork and Kerry that are currently outstanding; the planning that is being carried out to ensure that there is no repeat of the delays with applications experienced in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3761/22]

38. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the up-to-date position regarding the issuing of new passports given the improving travel outlook and the existing delays in passport applications and renewals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3853/22]

40. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of applications for passports from counties Longford and Westmeath that are currently outstanding; the planning that is being carried out to ensure that there is no repeat of the delays with applications experienced in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3696/22]

45. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of applications for passports from counties Mayo, Galway, Roscommon, Sligo, Leitrim and Donegal, respectively that are currently outstanding; the planning that is being carried out to ensure that there is no repeat of the delays with applications experienced in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3624/22]

50. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of applications for passports from each of the counties of Limerick, Clare and Tipperary that are currently outstanding; the planning that is being done to ensure that there is no repeat of the delays with applications experienced in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3697/22]

56. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of applications for passports from counties Kildare and Wicklow that are currently outstanding; the planning that is being carried out to ensure that there is no repeat of the delays with applications experienced in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3763/22]

62. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his attention has been drawn to the delay in processing passport applications for first-time passports for children and new citizens; the steps his Department is taking to alleviate this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3909/22]

64. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the current waiting times for passports both online and offline, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3688/22]

66. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of applications for passports from each of the counties of Carlow, Kilkenny, Wexford and

Waterford that are currently outstanding; the planning that is being done to ensure that there is no repeat of the delays with applications experienced in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3698/22]

67. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the proposals to reduce the waiting time for passport applications; if additional resources are being allocated for improving waiting times; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3788/22]

69. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the measures that are being taken to deal with the current processing times for passports given the number of renewals due for renewal in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3903/22]

75. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps being taken to reduce waiting times for passport applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3931/22]

80. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of applications for passports from counties Offaly and Laois that are currently outstanding; the planning that is being carried out to ensure that there is no repeat of the delays with applications experienced in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3692/22]

85. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the current wait time for a passport in County Cork. [3857/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 22, 32, 38, 40, 45, 50, 56, 62, 64, 66, 67, 69, 75, 80 and 85 together.

Passport Service operations were severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, 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. Despite the disruptions related to the pandemic throughout last year, the Passport Service issued over 634,000 passports in 2021 and 45% of simple adult renewals issued within one business day.

The Passport Service has been experiencing very high demand for passports since May 2021 and expects a high level of demand for passports to continue throughout this year. The Passport Service has put several measures in place to meet this anticipated demand. The Passport Service continually examines how to improve processing times and engagement with applicants. Preparation is currently underway for several system and service improvements that will enhance the customer service experience and will improve processing times. A particular improvement that will be of interest to Deputies is a change to the documentary management process that reduces the turnaround time when additional documents need to be submitted by the applicant.

In addition, my Department has been actively working with the Public Appointments Service to recruit additional permanent and temporary staff for assignment to the Passport Service. This recruitment drive has been underway since the last quarter of 2021 and will double the number of staff in the Passport Service from June 2021 levels. A significant number of additional staff are being assigned to the Passport Service throughout January, February and March. I am confident that these additional staff will help to reduce turnaround times and to respond to the current and anticipated high demand for first time and renewal passports in 2022.

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.

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

There are currently 100,000 online applications and 13,000 paper applications on hand with the Passport Service. The 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 provide 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 45% of current 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 high demand for first time passports, particularly for children. 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 first time 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, the processing time is 40 working days.

There are currently 30,000 first time child applications on hand with the Passport Service. Of these, almost 13,000 or 43% are incomplete applications that require additional documentation from the applicants' guardians in order to complete the application and ensure that the child's passport can be issued.

Passport Online is the priority channel for applications as there are many efficiencies built into the system for both the applicant and the Passport Service. The processing of an online application is consistently up to four times faster than the processing time of a paper application.

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

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

The table below outlines the number of complete online passport applications currently on hand with the Passport Service by county.

Online passport applications with Passport Service by county

County	Nos.
CARLOW	254
CAVAN	306
CLARE	429
CORK	2,591
DONEGAL	557
DUBLIN	6,813
GALWAY	1,060
KERRY	586
KILDARE	1,155
KILKENNY	372
LAOIS	345
LEITRIM	115
LIMERICK	883
LONGFORD	143
LOUTH	653
MAYO	497
MEATH	1,013
MONAGHAN	215
OFFALY	261
ROSCOMMON	201
SLIGO	267
TIPPERARY	585
WATERFORD	549
WESTMEATH	361
WEXFORD	609
WICKLOW	696

Northern Ireland

23. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the discussions he or his officials have had recently with the British and Northern Ireland authorities in relation to the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent agreements; the progress being made to create a stable, violence free society there; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3295/22]

26. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has discussed the need to implement in full the Good Friday Agreement with the political parties in Stormont; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3906/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 23 and 26 together.

The full implementation and effective operation of the Good Friday Agreement and all subsequent agreements is a central priority for this Government. The Agreements, as well as the principles and values underpinning them, are at the core of the Government's commitment to peace, reconciliation and prosperity on this island. The Peace Process has succeeded over the

last two decades in moving definitively beyond the violence of the Troubles. However, it is an ongoing process and the work of peace requires a consistent commitment and renewed efforts in the face of new challenges. Since the conclusion of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, it has been necessary to pursue a series of successive further political and legal agreements to consolidate the peace settlement provided for in the Good Friday Agreement.

Most recently of course, the New Decade New Approach Agreement, reached in January 2020, restored the devolved institutions after a three year absence. The Government is committed to working in support of the full implementation of the NDNA, and the fulfilment of our own commitments made alongside the agreement. An NDNA implementation review meeting is planned to take place in the period immediately ahead, which will provide opportunity to discuss the status of those commitments.

As co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement, the Government has continued to work closely on a North/South and East/West basis in support of the devolved power-sharing institutions in Northern Ireland, through the mechanisms provided for the Good Friday Agreement, including the North South Ministerial Council, the British Irish Council (BIC) and the British Irish Intergovernmental Conference. (BIIGC).

The most recent BIIGC took place on 2 December in London. In this format, both Governments discussed a broad range of topics relating to Northern Ireland, including the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent agreements. I have also continued to engage regularly with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and with the leaders of the parties in Northern Ireland, as we work to ensure progress, stability and address pressing challenges, including the outworkings of Brexit and the legacy of the Troubles.

A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland is a central provision of the GFA. An Ad-Hoc Assembly Committee has been established, and the Committee published its research paper in March 2020, and launched a public consultation in May. The Government remains firmly committed to the provision of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

All parties to the GFA recognised the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, which in Northern Ireland includes the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic communities. There is now a commitment in place from the British Government to legislate to implement the relevant provisions of the NDNA agreement if the Northern Ireland Assembly fails to do so.

Progress has also been made regarding the Government's commitments supporting the Irish language in Northern Ireland, including the allocation of: €3m as part of the commitment in Budget 2021 for Irish language broadcasting; €1.8m over three years (2020-22) to support the Irish language in Northern Ireland; and an All Island expansion of existing Irish Language Network strategy.

The Government continues to support the establishment of a dedicated structure for civic engagement by the Northern Ireland Executive as set out in the Good Friday Agreement under Strand One. In the NDNA agreement, it was agreed that the Compact Civic Advisory Panel would be reformed to propose the most appropriate model for civic engagement on specific issues.

The Government also continues to support the establishment of the North South Consultative Forum, as provided for under Strand Two of the GFA, and has worked to move the issue forward, submitting proposals to the Northern Ireland Executive for its consideration. We have also raised the issue at successive plenary meetings of the North South Ministerial Council.

Furthermore, the Reconciliation Fund, administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs, continues to support the vital work of peace and reconciliation. The budget of the Reconciliation Fund will increase to €5.0 million this year, with these funds playing an important role to aiding a wide range of projects and organisations to carry out their impactful work across communities.

Diplomatic Relations

24. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the current state of diplomatic relations between Ireland and Ethiopia; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3884/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): Ireland's partnership with Ethiopia is longstanding - our Embassy in Addis Ababa opened in 1994 and Ethiopia has been our largest bilateral development partner in the last five years.

The situation in Tigray and in other parts of northern Ethiopia since the outbreak of the conflict in late 2020 is of grave concern. The conflict is having a devastating impact on civilians with widespread human rights violations, while the number of casualties continues to rise. Over 9 million people are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance.

Ireland has played a leading role in the international response to the crisis. Through our bilateral engagements, as well as within the European Union and at the UN Security Council, Ireland continues to advocate for full humanitarian access to those in need, an urgent end to violence, dialogue, accountability for atrocities, and ultimately a political solution to the conflict.

Ireland's principal focus has been on the humanitarian consequences of the war and the need to end the violence. Last year, Ireland contributed almost €25m to the humanitarian response in Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian authorities indicated that their decision last November to restrict the size of our Embassy in Addis Ababa was due to the positions Ireland has articulated internationally, including at the UN Security Council, on the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia.

As we have made clear, our positions on the conflict are shared by our EU partners and the wider international community. Our focus has been on ending the conflict and addressing humanitarian needs. Our solidarity with and commitment to the people of Ethiopia remains strong, and we will continue to have frank and constructive engagement with our Ethiopian counterparts. We hope the decision of the government of Ethiopia will be temporary, so that our Embassy staff can return to carrying out their important duties in the country as soon as possible.

Northern Ireland

25. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of visits he has paid to Northern Ireland in the past three months; the organisations, groups or persons he met on these visits; the feedback they gave on matters there; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3296/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): As part of the Government's commitment to supporting the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement and maintaining strong relationships, I remain in regular contact with Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the First

Minister and deputy First Minister and party leaders, as well as other civil society, business and religious leaders in Northern Ireland ,

In the past three months, the public health situation and guidance has meant that in-person meetings have been more limited . Nevertheless, I have held regular video conferences and meetings where this has been possible, with a broad range of key stakeholders.

I have been particularly actively engaged in relation to the legacy of the Troubles and our ongoing efforts to make progress in addressing this exceptionally sensitive issue. Most recently on 19 January 2022, I met in Dublin with the cross community Truth and Justice victims group, to discuss their cases and concerns about the way forward and as part of a series of engagements with victims and families who are central to making progress on this issue.

I have remained in very regular contact with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland as we have sought to work for an agreed way forward, as well as with the party leaders, and together with the Secretary of State I co-chaired a meeting of the Northern Ireland party leaders on 30 November.

Together with Minister for Justice Helen McEntee TD, I travelled to London on 2 December 2021 to participate in the British Irish Intergovernmental Conference with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Brandon Lewis MP. We discussed a broad range of topics relating to Northern Ireland, including the legacy, opportunities for East-West co-operation, and Covid recovery.

Earlier this month, I also met in London with UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss, to discuss issues including the outworking of Brexit and the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. I have also maintained contact with Northern Ireland's business community with regard to the Protocol and last met virtually with business leaders on 11 November.

I will continue to engage closely with the First Minister, deputy First Minister, other political, religious, civil society, and business leaders in Northern Ireland as we move forward, and look forward to increased visits there as the public health context allows.

Question No. 26 answered with Question No. 23.

Foreign Conflicts

27. Deputy John Brady asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the measures that Ireland is taking on the United Nations Security Council and within the European Union to ensure that steps are taken to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe occurring in Afghanistan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3887/22]

58. Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the role the United Nations is taking to protect citizens and their rights in Afghanistan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3907/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 27 and 58 together.

Ireland remains active in discussions on Afghanistan both at EU level and at the UN Security Council, where it has featured regularly on the agenda since the Taliban takeover in August 2021.

Promoting human rights and the protection of civilians are key priorities for Ireland on

the Security Council. We have consistently advocated for Afghan women and girls, who must be treated as equal citizens, with rights to full and equal access to education, to healthcare, to freedom of movement and participation in public life. We have emphasised the need to maintain humanitarian access to address what is now the world's largest humanitarian crisis. Ireland strongly supported UN Security Council Resolution 2615, adopted on 22 December 2021, which exempts humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan from UN sanctions against members of the Taliban.

Ireland's approach is consistent with the EU Council Conclusions on Afghanistan of September 2021, to which we contributed and which highlight the effect of the Taliban actions on civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights, and on the gains made over the last two decades, which had been supported by the EU. Among the guiding principles agreed by the EU are that the Taliban must respect the independence of humanitarian operations and guarantee safe and unhindered access for all humanitarian staff, including all female staff, and that they must promote, protect and respect all human rights, in particular the full enjoyment of rights of women and girls.

I remain gravely concerned at the deteriorating human rights situation in Afghanistan. The continued absence of many non-governmental organisations, civil society networks, and diplomatic missions from Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover has made the role of the UN in monitoring and reporting on developments inside Afghanistan, especially on human rights, more important than ever before. Representatives of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) have met regularly with high-ranking members of the Taliban administration to highlight Afghanistan's human rights obligations under international law. The mandate for UNAMA is due to be renewed by the UN Security Council by 17 March. Ireland will advocate strongly for the maintenance of human rights tasks in that mandate, to operate in tandem with the implementation of last October's EU-led resolution at the UN Human Rights Council on the "Situation of human rights in Afghanistan", which establishes a mandate for a Special Rapporteur, to be appointed at the March 2022 session.

The UN launched a funding appeal on 11 January, seeking approximately \$5 billion to meet the emergency humanitarian needs within Afghanistan and of Afghan refugees in the region. This is the largest such humanitarian appeal ever issued by the UN. Since the Taliban seizure of power, the EU and its Member States have allocated more than €1 billion in funding to UN agencies and NGOs working in Afghanistan, for both humanitarian aid and for supporting basic needs ('humanitarian plus'). The EU also established a humanitarian air bridge that in 2021 delivered 280 tonnes of lifesaving medication, food and equipment to address COVID-19 to Afghanistan.

In addition, the Government through its Development Assistance programme, Irish Aid, has provided over €4 million in humanitarian support for the people of Afghanistan since mid-August. This funding has been allocated to the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund (AHF) and UNICEF. These emergency response programmes are addressing the urgent needs of the population, including providing food aid, treatment for severe acute malnutrition in children, and other essential services. Ireland's humanitarian funding to Afghanistan increased fivefold in 2021 to over €5 million – with the remainder provided at the beginning of the year to Concern Worldwide, HALO Trust and the AHF.

In addition, Ireland contributes to support global funds and provide core funding to key agencies that allocate funding to Afghanistan, including the EU, WHO, UNHCR, IFRC, ICRC and the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF). Ireland was the 9th largest donor to the CERF in 2021, providing €11 million. Since August, the CERF has allocated more than €68.6 million to Afghanistan.

Foreign Conflicts

28. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will outline the European Union and United Nations position on the massing of Russian troops on the border with Ukraine; if the international community is sufficiently committed to protecting the interests of Ukraine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3877/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland has strongly and consistently supported the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine as I have conveyed personally to Ukraine's Foreign Minister, Dmytro Kuleba, on a number of occasions over the past year. Ireland is concerned by the build-up of Russian troops on its border with Ukraine and I continue to call on Russia to de-escalate tensions. In my own remarks, I have consistently underlined the need for strong and unified messaging from the EU.

I and my EU colleagues discussed the situation in Ukraine most recently at the Foreign Affairs Council on Monday of this week (24 January). EU Foreign Ministers have been consistently engaged on this issue and have delivered clear messages of solidarity with Ukraine both at the Foreign Affairs Council of 13 December and again at our informal Foreign Minister's meeting in Brest, hosted by the French Presidency on 13 and 14 January.

In remarks after the December Foreign Affairs Council, High Representative Borrell made clear that aggression against Ukraine, will come with political consequences and with a high economic cost for Russia. This message was further reinforced in the Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions of 24 January, which state that preparatory work has accelerated on restrictive measures in case of further military aggression by Russia against Ukraine. Council Conclusions also condemn Russia's continued aggressive actions and threats against Ukraine, and call on Russia to de-escalate.

The UN Secretary General, António Guterres on 21 January called on the international community to avoid a confrontation and to create the conditions for a diplomatic solution of the problem. Ireland has consistently reaffirmed its support for Ukraine at UN Security Council meetings on Ukraine, including at Arria formula meetings. Ireland co-sponsored the Arria formula meeting on Crimea organised by Estonia and Ukraine in March 2021, which also focused on the worrying human rights situation on the peninsula. On 9 December, Ireland co-sponsored the General Assembly resolution on the demilitarisation of Crimea, and joined the EU statement on 9 December, as we have done in previous years.

Foreign Conflicts

29. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has discussed the ongoing war in Yemen and the humanitarian crisis with his counterparts across Europe; if consideration has been given to the imposing sanctions on Saudi Arabia; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3926/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Yemen is the world's worst humanitarian crisis, driven by seven years of conflict, economic collapse and the breakdown of public institutions and services which has left over 24 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. Ireland and the European Union fully support the efforts of the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Hans Grundberg, to bring about a political resolution to the conflict in Yemen. EU Member States are in agreement that there is no military solution to the conflict in Yemen and all parties should agree to an immediate ceasefire. In addition to significant diplomatic efforts, the EU has provided nearly €1 billion to Yemen since 2015 in development, crisis response and

humanitarian assistance. At a national level, Ireland has contributed over €32 million in humanitarian funding to Yemen since 2015. As a member of the Security Council, Ireland has engaged extensively in support of the UN's efforts to end the conflict in Yemen. I have held discussions with the UN Special Envoy for Yemen as well as Major General Michael Beary, who was recently appointed as Head of the United Nations Mission to support the Hudaydah Agreement.

I have also engaged extensively with the countries of the region, including the Foreign Ministers of Yemen, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, stressing the need to work urgently towards a resolution of the conflict.

Sanctions are an important foreign policy tool for the promotion and maintenance of international peace and security. In order to be effective and impactful, sanctions generally need to be agreed by a large number of countries. For Ireland, this typically means aligning with sanctions regimes agreed at the EU or UN level. There is not currently a consensus among either the EU, or the UN Security Council, on the introduction of sanctions against Saudi Arabia. Ireland will continue to support all efforts to end the terrible conflict in Yemen, including in the context of our position on the UN Security Council and as an EU Member State.

Foreign Conflicts

30. Deputy Richard Bruton asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will update Dáil Éireann on the actions of the United Nations Security Council in respect of the military coup in Myanmar. [3860/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland strongly condemns the coup carried out by the Myanmar military and its attempts to legitimise the military regime. The coup is a reversal of the progress made towards democracy and rule of law in Myanmar which took years to establish. Ireland is actively engaged on this issue in our role as an elected member of the Security Council, including by calling on the military and all parties for an urgent end to violence, full respect for human rights and compliance with international law, including international humanitarian and human rights law.

The situation in Myanmar has been considered seven times by the Security Council since the coup, most recently on 8 November 2021. The Council has expressed deep concern regarding developments in Myanmar, condemned the use of violence by the military, and called for the release of all those detained. The Council is actively monitoring the situation, and, most recently, a press statement was issued following the atrocities in Kayah State on 24 December.

The united voice of the Security Council on the situation in Myanmar is welcome, sending a clear message to the Myanmar military. Ireland coordinates with likeminded Council members towards further action, and was also a member of the core group of nations who proposed the June 2021 United Nations General Assembly resolution which called for an end to arms flows to Myanmar.

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

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

EU Meetings

31. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on his attendance at the meeting of the European Union General Affairs Council on 25 January 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3767/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Thomas Byrne): I attended the General Affairs Council meeting on 25 January 2022 in Brussels. At the meeting, the French Presidency gave a presentation on the priorities for their presidency of the Council of the EU. The three overarching goals of the Presidency are a Sovereign Europe, a New European Model for Growth and Investment, and a ‘more human’ EU. Ireland supports the priorities of the French Presidency. I look forward to working closely with my French colleagues over the coming six months.

There was also a debate on a legislative package on reinforcing democracy and the integrity of elections. Ireland welcomes this legislative package and considers that it forms an important aspect of the European Democracy Action Plan as well as being complementary to the Government’s own plans for a new Electoral Reform Bill currently under preparation. Given the challenges facing democracies at the moment, the measures contained within this package offer an effective means of safeguarding EU values against present and future threats.

We also exchanged views on the Conference on the Future of Europe. I participated in the 3rd Conference Plenary, which took place in Strasbourg and online last weekend. Plenary members discussed and debated recommendations from citizens from all over Europe. These included recommendations in the areas of health, climate change, rule of law and EU Democracy. The second and conclusive phase of Ireland’s national programme of regional consultations will soon commence and I also look forward to Dublin hosting Citizens’ Panel 1 in late February.

On EU-UK relations, the General Affairs Council received an update from Commission Vice President Maroš Šefcovic on the current state of play in EU-UK relations. Ministers were briefed on the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland and Vice-President Šefcovic’s meetings with UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss on 13–14 January and 24 January. I expressed my strong support for the Commission’s approach to resolving outstanding issues in relation to the Protocol.

Ministers also discussed the EU’s coordination on the Covid-19 pandemic, including Digital COVID Certificates and travel-related matters.

Question No. 32 answered with Question No. 22

United Nations

33. **Deputy Fergus O’Dowd** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his Department support the work of the United Nations in terms of supporting refugees; the amount of funding allocated in 2021; the amount planned for 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3626/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): Provision of assistance to refugees through the United Nations remains a critical part of Ireland’s policy. This assistance is provided through a wide range of agencies (including UNICEF, OCHA, UNRWA, WFP, WHO etc.) but it is the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) which is mandated to lead and co-ordinate international action to protect refugees

worldwide and safeguard their rights and well-being. UNHCR also assists former refugees who have returned to their homeland, internally displaced people, and people who are stateless.

UNHCR's Global Appeal for 2022 seeks \$8.9 billion and shows the number of persons of concern to UNHCR is expected to reach over 100 million.

In 2021 Ireland pledged contributions of €17 million to UNHCR but actual contributions exceeded €19 million. This total comprised of €10.5m in core funding (up from €9m in 2020), as well as specific contributions to UNHCR's work in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Uganda, Jordan, Bangladesh (Rohingya crisis) and in response to the Venezuela crisis. Ireland has made a pledge of €18 million to UNHCR for 2022.

I was delighted to be able to participate in a High Level Meeting in December which took stock of progress made in achieving the objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees, including through the pledges and contributions made and initiatives announced at the first Global Refugee Forum in 2019. I noted that - in addition to fulfilling our pledges to support UNHCR - we had progressed our pledges in other areas including:

- We are implementing our pledge to address the root causes of displacement through support of €4.5m for global peacebuilding initiatives. Since 2020, Ireland has contributed €4.5 million to the UN Peacebuilding Fund and last year Minister Coveney pledged to increase Ireland's funding to €10 million over the period 2020-2024.

- Our core funding pledge to the International Organisation for Migration has been fulfilled with €1 million per year provided and maintained.

- Ireland has fulfilled and exceeded its pledge to increase support for education in emergencies and protracted crises.

Overseas Development Aid

34. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his Department supports initiatives or programmes aiming at tackling global inequality in terms of education; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3644/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): Ireland's international development policy, *A Better World*, puts reaching the furthest behind first at the centre of Ireland's development cooperation. Education is at the heart of delivering on this ambition.

My Department, through the Irish Aid programme, provides support for education in low income countries, with an emphasis on the most marginalised within those countries. For example, in Uganda, Ireland focuses its education support in Karamoja, which historically has significantly lagged behind other regions of Uganda in terms of education access and achievement, particularly for girls.

Last year I announced a new pledge of €60 million for the Global Partnership for Education. This fund supports countries with the greatest education needs, targeting those with large numbers of children out of school, and weak school completion rates. Within those countries, it targets the most vulnerable and hardest to reach children.

Children in conflict situations and other humanitarian emergencies face some of the greatest inequalities in education. Since 2019 Ireland has committed €11.85 million to Education Can-

not Wait, a fund which supports the urgent education needs of children and youth caught up in wars, forced displacement, natural and man-made disasters.

Ireland addresses gender inequalities in education through better education planning, creating safe school environments, and reducing the risk of gender based violence. In 2020 Ireland launched the Drive for Five, a global call to action for the education of adolescent girls. We continue to promote a holistic approach to getting all adolescent girls into school, keeping them there, and ensuring schools are supportive, safe and healthy environments.

COVID-19 disrupted education globally and has generated significant learning losses, disproportionately affecting poorer and marginalised students. An immediate priority is to use the Irish Aid programme to assist partner countries to safely reopen schools and enable the return to in-person learning for all, with remediation and acceleration programmes to make up for learning losses.

Question No. 35 answered orally.

Foreign Birth Registration

36. Deputy Neale Richmond asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on the processing times for the foreign births register; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3074/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The processing of Foreign Birth Registration applications 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, the large increase in applications received following the Brexit vote in the UK, and the pause in the Service due to necessary Covid-19 restrictions, applicants should allow approximately 2 years from the receipt of supporting documentation for processing of Foreign Birth Registration applications at this time.

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, and the subsequent reassignment of Foreign Birth Registration staff to assist in the provision of essential passport services, the Foreign Birth Registration Service was paused for nearly 15 months across the 2020-2021 period. Foreign Birth Registration staff have continually provided an emergency service for Foreign Birth Registration in cases of exceptional urgency, such as expectant parents, or stateless persons. Applicants who require an emergency service may contact the Passport Service directly.

There are currently 32,000 applications awaiting processing. In 2021, over 7,000 Foreign Birth Registration applications were processed.

My Department is fully committed to the allocation of additional resources to assist with the processing of the Foreign Birth Registration applications currently on hand and the high volume of new applications anticipated this year. The Department has been actively working with the Public Appointments Service to recruit additional permanent and temporary staff for assignment to the Passport Service. This recruitment drive has been underway since the last quarter of 2021 and will double the number of staff in the Passport Service from June 2021 levels. A significant number of additional staff are being assigned to the Passport Service throughout January, February and March. I am confident that the additional staff being assigned to the Passport Service will help to reduce turnaround times and to respond to the current and anticipated high demand for passports and Foreign Birth Registration this year.

Northern Ireland

37. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has discussed with members of the Northern Ireland Executive the need to progress the establishment of a bill of rights in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3905/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland is a central provision of the Good Friday Agreement. The Agreement sets out that a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland should be based on the European Convention on Human Rights, enhanced by additional rights to “reflect the principles of mutual respect for the identity and ethos of both communities and parity of esteem.”

The full implementation and effective operation of the Good Friday Agreement and all subsequent implementation agreements is a central priority for this Government. These agreements, as well as the principles and values underpinning them, are at the core of the Government’s approach to peace, reconciliation and prosperity on this island. The Government advanced the view during the 2014 Stormont House talks that a Bill of Rights could set out precisely and formally the rights upon which a shared society for Northern Ireland could be based. While there was not sufficient consensus to take this forward, the final Agreement did provide that the parties commit to: “serving the people of Northern Ireland equally, and to act in accordance with the obligations on government to promote equality and respect and to prevent discrimination; to promote a culture of tolerance, mutual respect and mutual understanding at every level of society, including initiatives to facilitate and encourage shared and integrated education and housing, social inclusion, and in particular community development and the advancement of women in public life; and to promote the interests of the whole community towards the goals of reconciliation and economic renewal.” As agreed as part of the New Decade, New Approach agreement, an Ad-Hoc Assembly Committee has been established, and the Committee published its research paper on the “Key Issues for a Bill of Rights” in March 2020, and launched a public consultation in May. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) was established as a result of the Good Friday Agreement. It is part of a wider package of safeguards to ensure that every citizen in Northern Ireland is guaranteed equal status and equal protection under law. In February 2021, the NIHRC produced a response to the public consultation of the Ad-Hoc Committee, which emphasises that there is a need to harmonise the European Convention on Human Rights, as domesticated through the Human Rights Act, and any proposed Bill of Rights for NI to ensure a complementary interpretation about the meaning and scope of human rights. At present, the Ad-Hoc Assembly Committee has concluded holding formal evidence gathering sessions on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. The next step, as agreed as part of the New Decade, New Approach Agreement, is for the First and deputy First Ministers to jointly appoint a Panel of five experts to assist the Committee in preparing its report. As outlined in the Programme for Government, the Government is committed to working in support of the full implementation of the NDNA. An NDNA Implementation Review Meeting is planned for the period ahead, which provides for an opportunity to discuss progress made to date as well as outstanding commitments.

Question No. 38 answered with Question No. 22.

Enterprise Support Services

39. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the reason the Back for Business programme is restricted to a final 50 applicants given that participants on the 2021 programme more than tripled their combined workforce and more than doubled their turnover

during the six-month cycle of the programme (details supplied); his views on whether participation in such a successful programme should be made available to a larger number of applicants; the learnings that are being taken and implemented into other domestic enterprise and job creation networks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3852/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): The Back for Business Programme assists returning emigrants who are looking to start their own business in Ireland, with a particular focus on the additional barriers and challenges faced by those who have been out of the country for some time.

I am pleased to inform the Deputy that we are expanding this programme. As the Deputy has noted, the scheme has generated overwhelmingly positive feedback and has to date assisted over 120 participants returning to Ireland from all over the world in creating businesses and employment opportunities across the country.

The next cycle of the programme will get underway at the end of February this year.

Up to 50 places will be available annually which is a 20% increase in capacity from previous rounds. We have also extended the cycle of the programme by an additional year.

In line with best practice and the experience of similar schemes operated by other Government Departments, access to the scheme is by way of a competitive process. This ensures that the successful applicants are those best positioned to benefit from participation in the scheme. This is a driver of the good outcomes which are being achieved.

This year we are introducing a community networking aspect for those who have completed the programme to support former participants and others to stay connected and to further enhance the assistance and advice we provide to our returning emigrant entrepreneurs.

The Back for Business initiative has itself drawn lessons from other domestic and job creation networks. For instance, its reliance on peer to peer learning through volunteer lead entrepreneurs was drawn from the experience of the 'Going for Growth' initiative supported for the last 14 years by Enterprise Ireland. That sister initiative, which is run in conjunction with KPMG, was a recipient of a European Enterprise Award for its work encouraging female entrepreneurs to increase their ambition and supporting them to achieve their growth aspirations and is an exemplar for our Back for Business Programme.

I would call on all Deputies to encourage those they know that have returned to Ireland in the last three years, and are starting a new business, to apply for a place on Back for Business. Those interested should access www.backforbusiness.com and register their interest and a link to an application form will be sent to them. Closing date for receipt of completed application forms is midnight on 15 February.

Question No. 40 answered with Question No. 22.

Foreign Conflicts

41. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the discussions he has had with his European Union counterparts on the increased tensions between Russia and Ukraine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3930/22]

47. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the discussions that have taken place at European Union level with regard to the situation in Ukraine; and if he will make

a statement on the matter. [3695/22]

70. Deputy John Brady asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the measures that the Government is taking at European Union level to bring a peaceful solution to the current crisis in Ukraine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3885/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 41, 47 and 70 together.

Ireland is a strong and consistent supporter of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and condemns Russian violations of Ukrainian sovereignty. The build-up of Russian troops on the border with Ukraine is a matter of great concern. It is important that dialogue be maintained, with the primary goal of de-escalating tensions in the region. In this regard, I welcome the intensive diplomatic efforts which have occurred in recent weeks, aimed at defusing tensions. These include bilateral discussions between the US and Russia, between NATO and Russia, and at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. As a participating State in the OSCE, Ireland is pleased to express solidarity with Ukraine and seek a peaceful de-escalation of tensions in that forum.

Over the course of the last year, the EU has dedicated significant time to the situation in Ukraine, not least at the Foreign Affairs Council. The EU has been and will remain united in extending solidarity to Ukraine and condemning Russian aggression. I commend Ukraine on its resilience and restraint in the face of continued Russian aggression. The latest build-up of troops near Ukraine has caused a sustained period of heightened tension over recent weeks and months. This has been exacerbated by Russia's security proposals which attempt to impinge on Ukraine's sovereign right as a nation to decide its own defence and external association policy.

I and my fellow EU Foreign Ministers discussed the situation again on Monday of this week at the Foreign Affairs Council of 24 January. That discussion built on our detailed exchange at the informal Foreign Ministers meeting in Brest on 13 and 14 January hosted by the French Presidency. In my own remarks, I have consistently underlined the need for strong and unified messaging from the EU.

EU leaders including the Taoiseach, at the European Council in December, clearly stated that any further military aggression against Ukraine will have massive consequences and severe cost in response. This has been reinforced in the Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions of 24 January, which state that preparatory work has accelerated on restrictive measures in case of further military aggression by Russia against Ukraine.

EU Foreign Ministers on Monday continued to emphasise the need for de-escalation and the prevention of further conflict in Ukraine. This is the outcome we want to see. Too many lives have already been lost in the conflict in Ukraine and we must always keep open the path of dialogue. This is why we and our EU partners view the Minsk Agreements as so important. Their full implementation remains the best avenue to achieve peace in Ukraine. The OSCE as a platform for regional security has also featured heavily in our recent discussions. The OSCE is the body that brings all parties in the region to the table and I am in favour of the EU continuing to invest significant effort there.

However, I and my counterparts also acknowledged that the EU must be willing to meet unacceptable behaviour from Russia with consequences. We cannot continue to do business with Russia as normal if it perpetrates further military aggression against Ukraine. This is why we have agreed to signal that preparatory work on restrictive measures has accelerated. We hope that this work won't be needed. We hope it won't come to that. But we need to be prepared to use the leverage we have in the interests of peace and security on the continent.

EU Foreign Ministers have also engaged with Ukraine directly, to ensure that its voice is heard and that we understand its perspective. This includes engagements with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba. I discussed these matters in person with Minister Kuleba when I travelled to Kyiv on 23 August to represent Ireland at the International Crimea Platform, a diplomatic initiative by Ukraine to seek a peaceful end to the illegal Russian occupation of the peninsula.

Question No. 42 answered orally.

Middle East

43. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the proposed timeframe to honour the Government commitment to recognise the state of Palestine. [3538/22]

46. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of plans to officially recognise the state of Palestine pursuant to the Programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3914/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 43 and 46 together.

I have been clear in my engagement with both Israel and the Palestinian Authority of the commitment of this Government to advancing a two-State solution, in line with the agreed parameters for a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Government has pledged to honour our commitment to recognise the State of Palestine as part of a lasting settlement of the conflict, or when we believe doing so will progress efforts to reach a two-state solution or protect the integrity of Palestinian territory.

As I have stated previously, in the absence of progress towards a two-State solution, I would be prepared to recommend to the Government early recognition by Ireland of a State of Palestine, if and when it might be helpful, and this is a matter which I discuss regularly with EU colleagues.

Recognition by Ireland outside the context of an overall peace agreement would, however, be likely to affect Ireland's influence on the Israel-Palestine conflict at EU and international level. Timing and context would affect whether such a loss of influence would be matched by a commensurate benefit for the Palestinian people and a positive impact on the peace process and a two-State solution.

Dublin-Monaghan Bombings

44. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on his engagement with the British Government on issues relating to the 1974 Dublin and Monaghan bombings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3642/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Dublin-Monaghan bombings saw the largest loss of life on a single day in the Troubles, with 33 people tragically killed and many more injured. The Government will continue to seek the full truth of these appalling attacks, and some measure of closure for those affected, in accordance with the three Motions passed unanimously by Dáil Éireann.

The all-party motion that was adopted by the Dáil on 25 May 2016, like those adopted in 2008 and 2011, calls on the British Government to allow access by an independent, international judicial figure to all original documents relating to the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, as well as the Dublin bombings of 1972 and 1973, the bombing of Kay's Tavern in Dundalk and the murder of Seamus Ludlow. The Programme for Government reiterates Ireland's commitment to engaging with the British Government on this issue as matter of priority, in accordance with the All-Party Dáil motions.

I have consistently underlined to the British Government that the Dáil motions represent the consensus political view in Ireland that an independent, international judicial review of all the relevant documents is required to establish the full facts of the Dublin and Monaghan atrocities. I have also underlined that the absence of a response from the British Government is of deep concern to the Government and indeed this House, and I have emphasised the urgent need for such a response.

In addition, at the last BIIGC, which took place on 2 December, I again raised our concerns in relation to specific individual legacy cases, including the Dublin-Monaghan bombings.

Officials from my Department met with Justice for the Forgotten last year to hear their views and update them on the Government's continuing engagement on legacy issues, including with the British Government on the Dáil motions.

The Government will continue to engage with the British Government on this request, at senior political level and in official level engagement by my Department, to pursue all possible avenues to achieve progress on this issue until a resolution is found.

Question No. 45 answered with Question No. 22.

Question No. 46 answered with Question No. 43.

Question No. 47 answered with Question No. 41.

Covid-19 Pandemic

48. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on the work of his Department in supporting the distribution of vaccines to protect against Covid-19 in developing countries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3911/22]

78. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the amount of funding provided by Ireland under the COVAX system for the distribution of Covid-19 vaccines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3635/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 48 and 78 together.

Ireland remains committed to an effective global response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past two years, my Department, through the Irish Aid programme, has invested €200 million in global public health with further investment to come in 2022 of at least another €100 million. This includes COVID-19 specific response measures, and ongoing work to strengthen health systems for the prevention and treatment of pre-existing conditions.

Experience from Irish Aid's engagement in the fight against HIV and Ebola demonstrates the importance of effective public health systems. Ireland continues to support health system strengthening through our funding to partners such as WHO, Gavi (The Vaccines Alliance), and

to the Global Fund for TB, HIV / AIDS and Malaria.

The WHO is optimistic that the world will hit the target of 70% of the world's population receiving their primary vaccination by mid-year. It is estimated that total production of vaccines will reach 19 billion by July. On 16 January, a shipment of vaccines to Rwanda included the billionth dose supplied via the COVAX facility. However, as long as a significant proportion of the world's population remains unvaccinated and without full access to testing, tracking and treatment, COVID-19 will remain a threat to lives and livelihoods.

Last week, I announced an additional Irish contribution of €5 million to COVAX at a Gavi event. This brings Ireland's overall contribution to COVAX to date to €13.5 million. This supports the purchase and distribution of vaccines in lower income countries. Ireland was one of the first donors to agree to cover the additional costs associated with donations of vaccines via the facility. The recent additional funding to COVAX will contribute to those costs, the financing of vaccines, and support to country readiness, such as the provision of equipment and technical support to boost vaccine rollout.

The Department of Health has received approval from Government to donate up to 5 million surplus vaccines to developing countries, largely through the COVAX facility. To date, more than 1.3 million of these doses have been delivered to countries including Nigeria, Ghana and Indonesia, with more expected. Further donations are expected in the coming weeks. The Department of Health, working closely with DFA, also facilitated the bilateral donation of 335,000 AstraZeneca doses to Uganda, specifically targeted to the vaccination of teachers to enable the reopening of schools. In addition, the response by the Irish public to the UNICEF "Get a Vaccine, Give a Vaccine" Covid-19 appeal has been exceptional, and acknowledged internationally.

With support from the Irish Aid programme to the HSE Global Health programme, key lessons learned from Ireland's response to COVID-19 have been shared with the Mozambican health service, while health workers on the frontline of the pandemic in Jordan and Ethiopia were supported with psychosocial training for resilience.

Finally, Ireland continues to promote the sharing of technology through various means, for example, the intellectual property underpinning Ireland's COVID Tracker App has been shared to assist countries in their contact tracing efforts.

Covid-19 Pandemic

49. Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps a student (details supplied) can take to obtain a Covid-19 certificate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3913/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The rollout of the EU Digital COVID Certificate is a matter for the Department of Health. My Department continues to work closely with the Department of Health to ensure that Irish citizens vaccinated overseas are able to apply for the EU-DCC.

Irish citizens vaccinated abroad are advised that if the first dose was administered in Ireland and the second dose in another country, then the application should be made to the country where the second dose was administered. Information on applying for the EU-DCC in Norway is available at helsenorge.no/en/covid-19-certificate/.

The EU-DCC is not a precondition for travel to Norway from Ireland, but does make travel easier. My officials would be happy to follow up on this case with the citizen directly, should

the Deputy wish to provide further details.

Question No. 50 answered with Question No. 22.

EU Meetings

51. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on his attendance at the meeting of the European Union Foreign Affairs Council on 24 January 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3766/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I attended the meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council, which took place in Brussels, on Monday 24 January.

The Council discussed the current security situation in Eastern Europe at length. We held an exchange with US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, by video conference during which we reiterated our shared commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In our discussions, EU Foreign Ministers agreed that dialogue in line with the key principles that underpin European security, as enshrined in the UN Charter and the founding documents of the OSCE, is the best way to safeguard peace and stability. We also reiterated however that any further military aggression by Russia against Ukraine will have massive consequences and severe costs. We adopted Council Conclusions which reflected these positions. I emphasised the need to focus on diplomacy and dialogue, and I also updated my EU colleagues on Russian plans to conduct live fire naval exercises off the south west coast of Ireland.

We also assessed how the EU might best respond to recent developments in Syria and Libya. Ireland is currently co-penholder for Syria humanitarian issues on the UN Security Council, and I highlighted the humanitarian imperative to ensure access to aid for all those in need.

The Council also exchanged views on the situations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Indo-Pacific, Sudan and Mali. We agreed on our intention to progress restrictive measures against individuals responsible for destabilisation in Mali, in support of similar targeted actions already undertaken by ECOWAS, while also underlining the EU's commitment to supporting the Malian people.

Council Conclusions on the EU's priorities in UN human rights fora in 2022 and on peace operations and crisis management operations for 2022-2024 were also agreed.

Gender Balance

52. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on the progress being made in appointing women to senior diplomatic posts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3699/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department is committed to embedding a culture of dignity and respect in the workplace, emphasising gender, equality, diversity and inclusion, as set out in the Department of Foreign Affairs Statement of Strategy 2021-2023.

Advancing gender equality is a key objective in the Department's Human Resources Strategy 2019-2022. Since the launch of this Strategy, my Department has published a number of policies and supports, including a Maternity Leave Cover Policy, a Guide to Supports for Maternity, Adoptive and Parental Leave, and is currently in the early stages of developing a

Menopause Policy. In addition, a gender pay gap report has been published for the past three years which also examines the levels of men and women at senior grades at headquarters and at Missions abroad.

My Department has an active Gender Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (GEDI) Sub-Committee of the Management Board which has five working groups, one of which focuses on gender equality issues, including through the implementation of a Departmental Gender Equality Action Plan. The work underway across my Department complements wider efforts towards gender equality being advanced through the Civil Service renewal process.

At present, at Assistant Principal level and above, 46 percent are women. The proportion of Heads of Mission, by gender for the years 2011 to 2021, is set out in tabular form below. The figures demonstrate significant progress towards parity over the course of a ten year period. The percentage of female Heads of Mission is set to increase to 46 percent by the end of 2022 following the summer rotations at Missions abroad.

My Department remains committed to efforts to enhance gender equality at senior levels along with other commitments in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion.

Year	Female	Male
2011	15%	85%
2012	18%	82%
2013	22%	78%
2014	26%	74%
2015	26%	74%
2016	26%	74%
2017	27%	73%
2018	29%	71%
2019	33%	67%
2020	33%	67%
2021	38%	62%

Question No. 53 answered orally.

Irish Communities Abroad

54. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps taken to link-in with the local diaspora for the Consulate General for the North of England; if consideration is being given to the use of a building which housed an Irish club (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3791/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The establishment of the Consulate General of Ireland in Manchester in July 2021 has allowed us to strengthen our relationship with Ireland's diaspora and Irish community organisations across the North of England. I saw this first hand during my visit to open the new Consulate General on 1 October 2021. I engaged with representatives of numerous Irish community organisations at the opening reception in Manchester and during a programme at the Liverpool Irish Centre.

Since last July, the team at the new Consulate General has been active in engaging with our diaspora. It has visited Irish clubs in Liverpool, Leeds, Newcastle, Huddersfield, Warrington, and Manchester, including the Irish Club mentioned by the Deputy. It has also met with several

Irish community groups, such as Irish Community Care in Merseyside, and Irish Community Care Manchester, and Leeds Irish Health and Homes. In addition, the Consulate has engaged with Irish sporting and cultural organisations, including the Lancashire and Yorkshire GAA County Board, and met with Irish media entities, including Irish community radio programmes in Manchester and the makers of the Irish in the UK TV programme.

This outreach work builds on decades of engagement by Embassy London and the work of the Irish Abroad Unit in my Department. In 2021, funding of €1,336,551 was allocated to 25 organisations in the North of England under the Emigrant Support Programme.

My Department is working with Enterprise Ireland to select a location for a permanent Ireland House in Manchester, which will include the long term chancery for the Consulate. The Ireland House will facilitate the collective work of Team Ireland - enhancing bilateral relations, deepening regional engagement, advancing our commercial interests and diaspora engagement. Specific requirements have been identified for an Ireland House in Manchester. The building that housed the Irish Club referenced by the Deputy has been visited by the Consulate General team and I can confirm that full consideration of the suitability of this premises has been considered, in line with these specific requirements.

Foreign Conflicts

55. Deputy Barry Cowen asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on Ireland's recent participation on the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe meeting on Ukraine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3693/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ukraine features regularly on the OSCE agenda. I understand the Deputy to be referring to the recent meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council on 13 January, the first under the Polish Chair-in-Office.

Working to find a peaceful resolution of the conflict in and around Ukraine is a priority of the Polish Chair and will remain high on the OSCE agenda. Ireland participated in the Permanent Council meeting of 13 January and our position was reflected in the EU statement on behalf of all EU member States, including Ireland.

The statement highlighted that Russia's actions, including the illegal annexation of Crimea and its acts of aggression in eastern Ukraine, have led to a severe deterioration of the security situation in the OSCE area. It repeated that any further aggression against Ukraine will come with massive consequences and a high economic cost for Russia and called for a de-escalation of tensions.

The EU's full support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity was reiterated as was the need for the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine to be granted full, safe and unhindered access to the whole territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders. The statement also indicated that the OSCE is the most appropriate platform for a meaningful dialogue in good faith on every aspect related to comprehensive security and expressed our readiness to contribute constructively.

Question No. 56 answered with Question No. 22.

Question No. 57 answered orally.

Question No. 58 answered with Question No. 27.

Diplomatic Representation

59. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which Ireland's embassy and consular network is aligned with the goal of attracting development and business to Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3910/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Department of Foreign Affairs' Mission network plays an important role in advancing Ireland as a destination for business and investment. The Mission network works to increase trade, diversify our markets and support Irish companies to take advantage of new opportunities, which is particularly relevant as we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Mission network plays a key role in the Team Ireland approach, which sees Government Departments and State Agencies working closely with other Irish stakeholders to strengthen our international reputation and drive the development of trade, tourism, investment, science, technology and innovation, culture and education. Embassies and Consulates General provide support for Ireland's State Agencies strategic objectives and activities in overseas markets. The role of the Mission network in promoting Ireland as a location to do business, invest, study and visit, is particularly pertinent in markets with limited or no State Agency presence.

In June 2018, the Government launched the Global Ireland initiative, which aims to double the impact and scope of Ireland's global footprint by 2025. Global Ireland's targets include enhanced global engagement, the expansion of Ireland's Embassy network and strengthening of Ireland's State Agency presence overseas. Each of these measures will increase Ireland's international visibility, facilitate market diversification and intensification, and deepen bilateral relations in support of the Government's economic and political objectives.

This programme is now past the half way mark with 14 new Missions open and operational. To date, new Embassies have opened in Wellington, Bogotá, Amman, Monrovia, Santiago de Chile, Rabat, Manila and Kyiv, and new Consulates General in Cardiff, Frankfurt, Los Angeles, Manchester, Mumbai and Vancouver. We will also be reopening our Embassy in Tehran in 2023 and the Government has approved the opening of a further four new Missions in Dakar, Lyon, Miami and Toronto. New Missions have been opened in locations chosen on the basis, inter alia, of their potential to diversify our markets and increase trade and investment with Ireland.

Officers based at our Missions engage in economic and public diplomacy to advance Ireland's prosperity, as part of their overall duties to promote Ireland's interests and support our citizens. They work on a range of trade-related issues, including market access, regulatory compliance, visas, phyto-sanitary issues, and double taxation agreements.

The Mission network also supports Ministerial visits and trade missions, in partnership with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, other Government Departments and the State Agencies, which support the goal of securing high-level market access for companies based in Ireland that are aiming to grow business overseas, and in general helping deepen bilateral relations as the context in which trade and investment takes place.

Foreign Conflicts

60. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on the steps Ireland is taking as a member of the United Nations Security Council to address rising tensions between Russia and Ukraine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3765/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland has consistently made clear its support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and has supported Ukraine in a range of international fora in this regard. Along with our EU partners, Ireland has called on Russia to de-escalate the tensions caused by its protracted military build-up. The build-up of Russian troops near its border with Ukraine is a significant cause for concern to us.

The UN Secretary General, António Guterres on 21 January called on the international community to avoid a confrontation and to create the conditions for a diplomatic solution of the problem. Ireland has repeatedly reaffirmed its support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine at United Nations Security Council meetings on Ukraine, including at Arria formula meetings.

We have also stressed our non-recognition of the illegal annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, encouraged full, secure and unimpeded access for the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission, and called for the full implementation of the Minsk Agreements.

We co-sponsored the Arria formula meeting on Crimea organised by Estonia and Ukraine in March 2021, which also focused on the worrying human rights situation on the peninsula. We were also pleased to once again co-sponsor the General Assembly Resolution on the demilitarisation of Crimea, and we joined the EU statement on 9 December, as we have done in previous years.

Human Rights

61. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on the latest contacts that he or his Departmental officials have had with the government of Kazakhstan following the repression of protest movements there including the use of live ammunition to kill protesters; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3912/22]

71. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has discussed the recent uprising in Kazakhstan with his counterparts in Europe; if he will report on his discussions in relation to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3927/22]

81. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on the brutal repression of uprising in Kazakhstan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3840/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 61, 71 and 81 together.

I continue to be deeply concerned by recent developments in Kazakhstan. 225 people are reported to have been killed in violent clashes, and over 12,000 people arrested. Kazakh authorities have indicated that almost 1,000 people are still detained. It appears that initially peaceful protests at the beginning of the year rapidly escalated into violent clashes between apparently well-organised groups and the authorities. I welcome that calm has now been largely restored.

However, I am particularly concerned at reports that orders to open fire with lethal force were issued. The UN Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights has called for an independent, impartial, effective and public investigation to determine the legality of the use of force and to ensure accountability when lethal force was used by security services, law enforcement or the military. Ireland supports this call. Any domestic investigation must consider Kazakhstan's international human rights obligations.

Ireland will use our platforms at the EU and the UN to emphasise the importance of protecting the human rights and fundamental freedoms of Kazakhstan's people. If people wish to assemble peacefully and express their wish for democratic or economic reforms, that is their right and it must be protected. Ireland supported the 8 January statement of High Representative Josep Borrell Fontelles on the situation in Kazakhstan. He urged Kazakhstan's authorities to uphold their commitments including respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of their citizens, particularly, the freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, and of the media

I have not been in direct contact with the Government of Kazakhstan or civil society organisations in that country in recent weeks, but my officials and I will use any bilateral opportunities that arise to raise Ireland's concerns.

The Embassy of Ireland in Moscow remains in contact with a number of Irish citizens resident in Kazakhstan. The Embassy is available to provide consular assistance to any Irish citizens who may require it.

Question No. 62 answered with Question No. 22.

Covid-19 Pandemic

63. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on the continuing travel restrictions pertaining to Europe and United States of America; his further views on the continuing requirements to provide Covid certificates in the near future; his views on whether Irish citizens may soon be able to dispense with vaccine certificates for foreign travel in the event of a further weakening of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3855/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): As the Deputy will be aware, there are risks associated with international travel generally in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most recently, the spread of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 led to the introduction of new global restrictions on travel, many of which have since been eased. However, restrictions remain subject to change at short notice and this may remain the case for the foreseeable future.

The EU Digital COVID Certificate has been one of the EU success stories since the onset of the pandemic and it will remain an important tool to facilitate easier travel throughout the EU in the coming period.

Each country continues to be responsible for the definition of its own entry requirements and rules, including requirements to provide COVID-19 certificates of vaccination or recovery. There is no uniform approach to these requirements across the EU, and the United States of America also has its own specific rules. Information about entry restrictions applied by other countries is available on the Department of Foreign Affairs country-specific travel advice pages on our website. Anyone considering travelling abroad should monitor the latest advice before travel.

My Department provides comprehensive travel advice for over 200 countries so that citizens can make informed decisions on travel for themselves. I encourage citizens to exercise caution when making any decisions about international travel, taking account of their overall health and vaccine status, and to be aware of the risk of testing positive for COVID-19 while abroad.

Question No. 64 answered with Question No. 22.

Data Protection

65. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the details of the Governments' response to concerns within the European Union in relation to the mass storage of data on European Union citizens; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3886/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Issues relating to retention of European citizens data are primarily for the Minister for Justice.

The GDPR entered into force in 2018 and provides for higher standards of data protection for individuals and imposes more detailed obligations on bodies in the public and private sectors that process personal data. The GDPR also increases the range of possible sanctions for infringements of these standards and obligations. The accompanying Law Enforcement Directive (the Directive) was transposed into national law at the same time as the GDPR. The Directive establishes data protection standards for the processing of personal data by competent authorities for the purposes of the prevention, investigation, detection and prosecution of criminal offences and the execution of criminal penalties.

The transfer of personal data from the EU to third countries is carried out under a number of transfer mechanisms set out in Chapter V of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The default transfer mechanism is known as an 'adequacy decision', this is an implementing decision by the Commission which guarantees that the third country in question provides an equivalent level of protection of personal data as exists in the EU. Once a third country has been assessed by the Commission as providing an equivalent level of protection, transfers of EU citizen's data can take place between the EU and the selected third country under that adequacy decision, without limitation or additional safeguards.

A new arrangement with the EU-US in regard to safe transfers of data is an outcome we want to see achieved. This is critical for business certainty but also for the successful operation of the GDPR. The Government respects the judgment of the European Court and in regards to the Schrems II case is fully supportive of the need to protect citizens' data through enforceable safeguards and for proper redress mechanisms.

Any future adequacy decision must work for both the EU and US in facilitating data transfers. It must also critically be able to pass any future scrutiny of the European Court of Justice. It will have to ensure that EU data subjects' rights are thoroughly protected and are enforceable with proper redress mechanisms. We encourage the US administration and stakeholders to work positively with the European Commission in reaching a lasting and durable outcome to facilitate data transfers between the EU and US.

The EU – UK adequacy decisions (GDPR and LED) are an important element of the new relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union enshrined in the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA).

Question No. 66 answered with Question No. 22.

Question No. 67 answered with Question No. 22.

Official Engagements

68. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on his recent visit to Poland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3764/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Thomas Byrne): In my role as Minister of State for European Affairs, I visited Poland from 8-10 December 2021. As an EU partner, this visit was an important opportunity to further Ireland's bilateral relationship with Poland.

During my visit, I met with Konrad Szymanski, Poland's Minister for European Affairs and with Marcin Przydacz, Poland's Deputy Foreign Minister and Undersecretary of State for Security, the Americas, Asia and Eastern Policy.

Both meetings provided for important dialogue and engagement across several key issues on the EU agenda, including EU-UK relations, Covid-19 developments, EU economic recovery, Rule of Law developments, the Conference on the Future of Europe, Fit for 55, the situation of LGBTI+ persons in Poland, and developments at the Polish-Belarusian border.

In addition, this visit provided an opportunity to engage with those working on Human Rights, including LGBTI+ rights, and Rule of Law in Poland. Separately, it provided an opportunity to meet with Pavel Latushko, a leading Belarusian opposition figure and member of the Presidium of the Coordination Council of Belarus.

Amid the worrying resurgence in anti-Semitism across Europe, I also visited the site of the former German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp Auschwitz-Birkenau where I had the chance to honour the memories of all those who perished there.

Question No. 69 answered with Question No. 22.

Question No. 70 answered with Question No. 41.

Question No. 71 answered with Question No. 61.

Undocumented Irish in the USA

72. Deputy Brendan Griffin asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the latest position in relation to progress with the administration of President Biden regarding undocumented Irish citizens living in the United States of America; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3863/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Addressing the difficult situation of undocumented Irish emigrants in the US and working to secure legal pathways for Irish people wishing to live and work in the US have been priority issues for successive Governments and continues to be an important priority for the current Government.

Immigration issues continue to be raised on an ongoing basis through our engagement at all levels with the US Administration and political leaders. During his St. Patrick's Day virtual visit last year, the Taoiseach raised the matter directly with President Biden. I also raised immigration issues in my meetings on Capitol Hill on my most recent visit to Washington, DC. These engagements will continue as we maintain close relations with Members of Congress and contacts from across the political spectrum in the US, and as we seek opportunities to deepen and strengthen our bilateral relations with President Biden's Administration.

I am pleased to see that immigration issues, including possible pathways to citizenship, are a priority for President Biden, as demonstrated by his proposed US Citizenship Act of 2021. I look forward to working with his Administration as well as with the US Congress, on a bipartisan basis, as they pursue comprehensive immigration reform in the US. We will actively engage

with the Administration and Congress on this matter through our Embassy in Washington, D.C. The Government continues to pursue the E3 Visa Bill, which, if passed, could allow access to thousands of US visas each year to Irish citizens, providing new opportunities to live and work in the US.

Through our Embassy in Washington, D.C., as well as our Consulates across the US, my Department works closely with Irish immigration centres, which support the needs of Irish citizens. The Coalition of Irish Immigration Centers receives significant annual funding through the Government's Emigrant Support Programme. Last year, in response to the pandemic, a dedicated COVID-19 Response Fund for Irish Communities Abroad was set up to help these organisations meet the needs of those who are particularly vulnerable. In 2021, over €4.22m was paid to diaspora organisations in the US for ESP and Covid-19 related projects and support.

Question No. 73 answered orally.

Northern Ireland

74. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has raised the findings of the report of the Police Ombudsman in Northern Ireland into Operation Greenwich, which confirmed British state collusion in 19 loyalist killings and two attempted murders carried out by the UDA with the British Government; the nature of discussions; and the outcome of same. [3539/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): We are studying carefully this significant report published by the Police Ombudsman in Northern Ireland into Operation Greenwich, concerning the RUC's handling of paramilitary attacks by the UDA/UFF between 1989 and 1993, which resulted in 19 murders and multiple attempted murders.

Within this report, the Ombudsman has identified collusive behaviours and raised significant concerns about police conduct. Our thoughts are with the families who have lost loved ones in these attacks, and with the victims and survivors of these events. The publication of this report was undoubtedly an important and emotional moment.

I am also aware of a scheduled Dáil debate on the publication of this report due to take place in early February, which will provide an opportunity to discuss both this report and legacy developments.

All families deserve access to information and a process of justice for their loved ones, regardless of the perpetrator. It is vital that we put in place a comprehensive and agreed framework, as we set out in the Stormont House Agreement, to deal with the painful legacy of our past. Victims and families have been waiting for too long. We will continue to work for the implementation of such a 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.

The Government has consistently engaged with the British Government at all levels to caution strongly against unilateral action in this area. Only a collective approach, that meets the needs of families and upholds our shared human rights obligations, can be the way forward on this most sensitive of issues.

Question No. 75 answered with Question No. 22.

Questions - Written Answers
Overseas Development Aid

76. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the progress made on establishing a process to ensure that all Irish aid is spent in a way that is in full compliance with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as committed to in the Programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3837/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): In 2015, the member states of the United Nations committed to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 17 global goals designed “end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity” by 2030. Ireland, together with Kenya, acted as co-facilitators in achieving agreement on the SDGs, which apply to both developed and developing countries.

Ireland’s first SDG National Implementation Plan was published in 2018. The preparation of Ireland’s next National Implementation plan is underway, led by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications.

Overall cross-Government efforts on achieving the SDGs in Ireland are coordinated through an inter-Departmental working group, in which my Department is an active participant. My Department also chairs a separate working group to coordinate efforts towards achieving the SDGs internationally, working with a range of Government Departments that spend Official Development Assistance. This is a useful forum for coordination of international efforts in key areas such as climate action, response to COVID-19, and Ireland’s leading role on sustainable food systems.

The SDGs firmly underpin the Government’s international development policy, *A Better World*, published in 2019. That policy “grounds our international development policy in terms of what Ireland can, and must do, to achieve the SDGs.” *A Better World* identifies key priority themes which are rooted in Ireland’s development journey, represent our unique global contribution, and are closely aligned with several of the SDGs. These include, among others, addressing hunger, health outcomes, education for all, gender equality, peace and justice and climate action.

My Department has put in place key systems and processes to ensure Irish Official Development Assistance contributes to delivering on the ambition of the SDGs. These include mandatory reporting on SDG outcomes at appraisal stage of programme development, and routine tracking of expenditure against SDG outcomes. The Department is currently upgrading its electronic infrastructure for grant management which, when completed, will further improve our ability to monitor expenditure against SDG targets in real time.

Ireland’s Global Citizenship Education Strategy, which I launched last year, has an emphasis on the SDGs at its core. Funding towards development research, such as the SDG Challenge Fund in partnership with Science Foundation Ireland, is focused on research solutions to intractable SDG challenges. And strong Irish leadership within the OECD Development Assistance Committee on civil society space is based on the unique contribution civil society will play in the achievement of the SDGs, across all targets.

The Irish Aid Annual Report details the breadth of Ireland’s Official Development Assistance, presenting details of the impacts of Irish Aid’s investments in the prior year. It details activities of other Government Departments which are supporting international development work. The most recent report, for 2020, is available on my Department’s website.

Ireland is also an active member of the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee. Each year, we report on Ireland’s ODA expenditure to this committee in accordance with common

ODA standards. We also actively participate in decisions about what these standards should be. Periodically, our development programme is reviewed by DAC peers. The most recent such review, in 2020, found that Ireland is a strong development partner that ‘walks the talk’ on its poverty focus and on its commitment to least developed countries.

Covid-19 Pandemic

77. Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will endorse the World Health Organisation Covid-19 Technology Access Pool to facilitate the sharing of knowledge by pharmaceutical companies to increase vaccine production; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3908/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): Ireland fully supports an effective global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the need for equitable access to vaccines and technology.

In 2020, the WHO and the Government of Costa Rica launched the COVID Technology Access Pool, (C-TAP), to encourage the voluntary sharing of COVID-19 relevant technology, intellectual property and knowhow. The European Commission has been working with EU Member States including Ireland to identify options for possible cooperation. C-TAP is relevant to multiple Government Departments, including the Departments of Enterprise, Trade & Employment; Foreign Affairs; Health; and Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science.

Initiatives such as C-TAP play a role in strengthening the COVID-19 response, but other actions are also needed to address bottlenecks in vaccine delivery and distribution. To date, my Department has invested €200 million in COVID-19 response and global health, including strengthening health systems for the prevention and treatment of pre-existing conditions.

Alongside discussions around C-TAP at EU level, Ireland will continue to support the sharing of technology, such as the sharing of the IP behind the COVID Tracker App. As part of the National Open Research Forum, we have granted non-exclusive royalty-free licenses through Knowledge Transfer Ireland. In addition, through Science Foundation Ireland we align with ‘Plan S’, which requires that scientific publications that result from publicly-funded research be made openly available.

Already this year, my Department announced an additional contribution of €5 million to COVAX, bringing Ireland’s overall contribution to-date to €13.5 million, to purchase and distribute vaccines in lower income countries. The Department of Health has committed to donate up to 5 million surplus vaccines to developing countries, largely through COVAX. To date, more than 1.3 million of these doses have been delivered to countries including Nigeria, Ghana and Indonesia, with more expected. This in addition to the bilateral donation of 335,000 Astra-Zeneca doses to Uganda.

Question No. 78 answered with Question No. 48.

Human Rights

79. Deputy Catherine Connolly asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his plans to raise the treatment of human rights defenders and the restriction of civil society space in Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates at the United Nations Human Rights Council; and if he will make a

statement on the matter. [3915/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Respect for human rights is an integral part of Ireland's foreign policy and we consistently seek to raise our concerns on human rights issues through the most appropriate and effective channels.

I note with concern reports regarding the treatment of human rights defenders and the restriction of civil society space in Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. Officials from my Department have raised Ireland's concerns over the human rights situation in both Bahrain and the UAE with the authorities of each country.

Ireland's active participation at the UN Human Rights Council is a particularly important forum in which to raise our concerns regarding human rights. Ireland has raised human rights issues in Bahrain at the Human Rights Council in the form of National Statements and through support to EU Statements. In October 2021 the UAE was elected to the Human Rights Council for the term 2022 – 2024. This will be the third occasion that UAE has sat on the council and we hope their membership will provide scope for greater engagement on Human Rights issues.

Ireland also engages on the issue of human rights in Bahrain and the UAE as a member of the European Union. At the most recent EU-Bahrain Human Rights Dialogue in February 2021, issues of concern were raised by the EU including rule of law, prison conditions, right to a fair trial, freedom of expression, freedom of association, death penalty, torture and the impact of Covid-19 on the human rights situation.

The UAE was the first country in the Gulf with which the EU established a Human Rights Dialogue. The most recent session took place in June 2021. Issues of concern were raised by the EU including freedom of expression, digital technology, the human rights aspects of artificial intelligence, judicial independence, reports of indefinite detention and 'counselling centres', and delays in informing home countries when detaining foreigners.

Ireland will continue to monitor developments in both countries, and continue to call on the Bahraini and Emirati Governments to deliver on their stated commitments to make progress in relation to human rights.

Question No. 80 answered with Question No. 22.

Question No. 81 answered with Question No. 61.

Climate Change Policy

82. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of the setting up of a unit within his Department dedicated to working on Ireland's response to the global climate crisis and tasked with devising a strategy to scale up Ireland's climate finance contributions as committed to within the Programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3836/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): Following the commitment in the Programme for Government, a Climate Unit was established in the Department of Foreign Affairs in October 2020. The Unit is currently staffed by nine officials and is embedded in my Department's Development Cooperation and Africa Division.

The Climate Unit has built upon the climate work that was already underway across the Department, in particular the funding of climate action through the Irish Aid programme. The

Climate Unit currently has three main areas of thematic focus: Adaptation and Resilience, including Loss and Damage; Climate and Security; and Oceans. In addition, the Climate team are working with colleagues to strengthen capacity across the Department on climate issues.

At the World Leaders' Summit at COP26, the Taoiseach announced that Ireland will more than double its international climate finance by 2023, to reach at least €225 million per year. The target represents a significant increase on current levels of climate finance (€93.6 million in 2019) and is likely to assist in making significant progress towards the Programme for Government commitment to "at a minimum, double the overall percentage of our development assistance that counts as climate finance" by 2030.

The Programme for Government has tasked the DFA Climate Unit with devising a strategy to scale up Ireland's climate finance contributions.

The Strategy will provide a pathway to deliver on our targets, whilst ensuring that Ireland's climate finance is effective and impactful in supporting developing countries to address climate change.

The Climate Unit is working closely with the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, the Department of Finance and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and the Marine, along with other Government Departments, in the development of the Climate Finance Roadmap. Consultation has also taken place with civil society. Work on the Roadmap is well advanced, with a view to finalisation in the first half of the year.

Middle East

83. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he plans to join the foreign ministries of France, Germany, Italy and Spain in calling on Israel to end the construction of new housing units in east Jerusalem; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3883/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I have been consistently vocal in my opposition to illegal settlements and their expansion in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Settlement expansion, demolitions and evictions threaten the viability of a two-state solution.

During my visit to the occupied Palestinian territory in November, I saw first hand the impact that settlements are having on Palestinian communities and on prospects for peace. I am particularly concerned about developments in strategically sensitive areas around East Jerusalem.

I have conveyed in the strongest terms my concerns about settlements, which are illegal under international law, to the Israeli Foreign Minister, Yair Lapid. Ireland's Ambassador in Tel Aviv has also raised the issue directly with the Israeli authorities, most recently on 8 December. Ireland's Representative in Ramallah has made a number of visits along with EU colleagues to sensitive sites of concern in the West Bank.

Following the UN Security Council Open Debate on the Middle East on 19 January, Ireland made a joint press statement with France and Estonia, urging Israel not to proceed with new outline plans for the construction of hundreds of housing units in East Jerusalem, including the "Lower Aqueduct Plan" between Har Homa and Givat Hamatos. The plans will further undermine the territorial contiguity of a future Palestinian State. Ireland supported the statement of 19 January by the EU External Action Service spokesperson which urged Israel not to proceed with these plans. I also echo calls by France, Germany, Italy and Spain for the Israeli authorities

to reverse these decisions.

Ireland will continue to raise the issue at the Security Council, as well as at EU level and in our bilateral contacts.

Diplomatic Representation

84. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the increase in ambassadorial and consular appointments over the past three years in keeping with the goal to double Ireland's global impact by 2025. [3689/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): 'Global Ireland 2025' provides a cross-departmental roadmap to develop a broader and deeper platform to leverage Ireland's engagement globally. This initiative will continue to support efforts to grow and diversify export markets, inward investment and tourism and underpin economic recovery, in close coordination with the relevant State Agencies. In addition, the strategy will ensure that Ireland is better positioned to build the alliances necessary to advance its interests and defend national positions in the post-Brexit EU, while also helping to secure our deep and positive relationship with the UK and its constituent parts into the future.

Ireland's network of diplomatic and consular missions worldwide is critical to the achievement of our foreign policy objectives, supporting our citizens internationally and providing a global economic platform for our businesses. The network also ensures efficient delivery of passport and consular services to our citizens, support to emigrant organisations and outreach to the diaspora and other networks of influence.

Since the launch of Global Ireland, 14 new missions have been opened. These are new Embassies in Wellington, Bogotá, Amman, Monrovia, Santiago de Chile, Kyiv, Rabat and Manila with new Consulates General in Cardiff, Frankfurt, Los Angeles, Manchester, Mumbai and Vancouver. Plans are underway to open an Embassy in Dakar and Consulates General in Lyon, Miami and Toronto before the end of 2022. Further expansion of the overseas Mission network remains under review as part of the Global Ireland initiative.

Please see below in tabular form the new missions opened in 2018, 2019 and 2021, and the diplomatic staffing complement attached to each one:

Year	Mission	Staff
2018	Embassy Monrovia	Counsellor x 1 Development Specialist x 1 Third Secretary x 1
2018	Consulate Vancouver	First Secretary x 1 Third Secretary x 1
2018	Embassy Wellington	First Secretary x 1 Third Secretary x 1
2019	Embassy Amman	Principal Development Specialist x 1 Third Secretary x 1
2019	Embassy Bogota	Counsellor x 1 First Secretary x 1 Third Secretary x 1
2019	Embassy Santiago	Counsellor x 1 Third Secretary x 1
2019	Consulate Cardiff	First Secretary x 1 Executive Officer x 1
2019	Consulate Frankfurt	First Secretary x 1 Third Secretary x 1
2019	Consulate Los Angeles	First Secretary x 1 Third Secretary x 1
2019	Consulate Mumbai	First Secretary x 1 Third Secretary x 1

Year	Mission	Staff
2020	Not applicable	
2021	Embassy Kyiv	Counsellor x 1 Third Secretary x 1
2021	Embassy Manila	Counsellor x 1 Third Secretary x 1
2021	Embassy Rabat	Counsellor x 1 Third Secretary x 1
2021	Consulate Manchester	First Secretary x 1 Third Secretary x 1

Question No. 85 answered with Question No. 22.

Covid-19 Pandemic

86. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on his attendance at an event after a champagne party in Iveagh House on 17 June 2020. [3841/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I refer the Deputy to my response to PQ 3457/22. The Department is currently carrying out a review of the workplace arrangements on 17 June 2020, which will be completed by the end of this month.

Northern Ireland

87. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the message has been received in London that attempts to provide an amnesty in respect of troubles related atrocities is unacceptable and that justice is demanded in each case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3864/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): It has been the consistent position of the Government that there should be effective investigations into all Troubles-related deaths, regardless of the perpetrator. The rule of law and the protections afforded by the European Convention on Human Rights must apply equally to everyone and must be upheld, and this principle is at the core of the Stormont House framework.

The Stormont House Agreement was reached in 2014 by both Governments and the political parties after intensive negotiations, and sets out a comprehensive and balanced framework to address the painful legacy of the past.

The proposals published by the British Government on 14 July 2021 for a Statute of Limitation, ending criminal investigations and prosecutions relating to Troubles-related incidents, as well as inquests and civil litigation, represents a very radical departure from the Stormont House Agreement. We have been clear that this is not something we could support.

Where the British Government propose significant changes to that framework, these must be discussed and agreed by both Governments and the parties to the Northern Ireland Executive. Only through a collective approach can we hope to deal with these issues comprehensively and fairly and in a way that responds to the needs of victims, survivors and society.

Following a meeting of the British Irish Intergovernmental Conference on 24 June, we agreed to begin an intensive process of engagement with the British Government and the Northern Ireland parties to find an agreed way forward, with discussions beginning in July. Importantly, this process engaged fully with victims' representatives. It has also shown the breadth and strength of opposition to the proposals set out on UK Command paper on legacy.

At the last BIIGC, which took place on 2 December, I had a full discussion with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Brandon Lewis, in relation to the ongoing legacy engagement process, and to caution against unilateral action. The Taoiseach also wrote to the Prime Minister setting out his concerns on 7 December.

We have strongly communicated our position on this issue to the British Government and will continue to do so, and to seek a collective way forward. The Government will continue to engage and work with the British Government and the parties represented on the Northern Ireland Executive on this very important issue in the period immediately ahead.

Covid-19 Pandemic

88. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the amount of alcohol taken from the cellar of Iveagh House for the event on 17 June 2020; if food was delivered to the event; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3922/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Department's Security Council campaign team was working in a large open plan area of Iveagh House throughout the day on 17 June 2020. When the result of the UN Security Council vote was announced and it became apparent that Ireland had won a seat in the first round, Covid-19 guidelines were momentarily not followed. The then Secretary General acknowledged the mistake on 18 June 2020. The Department of Foreign Affairs has apologised unreservedly for the breach. No food or alcohol was provided by the Department of Foreign Affairs on 17 June 2020.

Covid-19 Pandemic

89. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if there were children in attendance at the event in Iveagh House on 17 June 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3923/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): As the Deputy will be aware the Department is currently carrying out a review of the workplace arrangements on 17 June 2020. This review will be completed by the end of this month. A child was present in a photograph uploaded on Twitter at the time and the review will address this matter.

Covid-19 Pandemic

90. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the means by which invitations were issued to attend the event in Iveagh House on 17 June 2020 to celebrate winning a seat on the United Nations Security Council; if there were children in attendance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3924/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): As the Deputy will be aware the Department is currently carrying out a review of the workplace arrangements on 17 June 2020. This review will be completed by the end of this month. A child was present in the photograph and the review will address this matter.

Covid-19 Pandemic

91. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the time the event in Iveagh House on 17 June 2020 finished; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3925/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): As the Deputy will be aware, the Department is currently carrying out a review of the workplace arrangements on 17 June 2020. The review will be completed by the end of this month and will include a timeline of that day.

Questions Nos. 92 to 100, inclusive, answered orally.

Questions Nos. 101 to 103, inclusive, answered orally.

Defence Forces

104. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Defence if he will report on the implementation of projects under the white paper on Defence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3795/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The White Paper on Defence sets the defence policy agenda over a ten year planning horizon and covers all aspects of defence within the broader security policy framework. Since publication of the White Paper in 2015, a total of 95 separate projects have been identified for completion over a ten-year period. To provide flexibility, projects may be sub-divided or merged, changing the top-line number. Project and Programme Management Governance arrangements were put in place to monitor the ongoing status of individual projects and to review the scope of projects within the programme.

Implementation of all of the projects is being carried out on a phased basis through the use of a project management framework with each being managed by a joint Civil-Military Project Team. The overall process is being kept under on-going review and will be subject to change as issues arise and other business dictates.

Following on from the White Paper Update 2019 and the Government's High Level Implementation Plan to implement the Report of the Public Service Pay Commission, senior civil and military management concluded a review in early 2021 of the projects which resulted in reprioritisation of certain projects. This took account of work that is progressing across the organisation which has been contributing to implementation of the White Paper.

The review of progress on all projects led to the approval of an updated White Paper Programme Implementation Roadmap. Of the initial 95 projects, 66 have been formally initiated to date with 47 now formally closed and an additional four are in the closing process. Commencement of a further 15 projects in the period 2022 to 2025 was also approved. 14 other projects have been deferred, pending recommendations of the Commission on the Defence Forces which is due to report shortly.

Question No. 105 answered orally.

Defence Forces

106. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Defence if his Department will be purchasing new land vehicles, naval vessels or aircraft in 2022. [3630/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): My priority as Minister for Defence is to ensure that the operational capability of the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service is maintained

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

The Department of Defence has received a capital allocation under the National Development Plan of €566m over the 2022-2025 timeframe. Within that capital allocation the Defence annual capital budget for 2022 is €141m.

There are a number of defensive equipment acquisition and upgrade projects for which there will be capital expenditure in the coming years and which will see the delivery of additional capability in 2022. These include the midlife upgrade of the Army's fleet of 80 Mowag Piranha III armoured personnel carrier vehicles which is well underway as well as the completion of the delivery of an additional 30 Armoured Utility Vehicles. The Army's softskin fleet continues to be updated also with over 220 vehicles due for delivery in 2022.

In relation to air-based capability, the programme for the supply of two C295 Maritime Patrol Aircraft is well underway with delivery of the aircraft expected in 2023. Alongside the recently acquired PC-12 aircraft some €276 million, including VAT, has been committed to the acquisition of all of these enhanced capabilities.

With regard to the Naval Service, the programme of works has for the midlife refit and upgrade of the LÉ Róisín has been completed, while works have commenced on LÉ Niamh. The replacement of the flagship LÉ Eithne with a multi-role vessel, MRV, is an important element of the EDP. Marine Advisors have been appointed to support the procurement of the MRV. The possible replacement of other vessels is also under consideration.

The Deputy will be aware that the Government established an independent Commission on the Defence Forces in December 2020. The work of the Commission encompasses the consideration of appropriate military equipment capabilities, structures and staffing, and their report will inform decisions regarding the future development of the Defence Forces.

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

Defence Forces

107. Deputy John Brady asked the Minister for Defence the measures that are currently being undertaken to provide the Defence Forces with the means to adequately patrol the air space controlled by Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3891/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The White Paper on Defence 2015 set out the defence policy framework for a ten year period. The White Paper, in addressing Air Corps capability, provided for the replacement of the Cessnas and Casa 235s fleets.

The Cessnas have now been replaced by three Pilatus PC-12 aircraft in the Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) role providing a substantially increased capability with their state of the art surveillance technology. A further Pilatus PC-12 was also procured arising from the demands of Covid. A contract for the supply of two C295 Maritime Patrol Aircraft to replace the two Casa 235s was signed with Airbus in 2019, with delivery of the aircraft expected in 2023. These C295s are larger and more capable aircraft than those they replace and will enable the Air Corps to conduct maritime patrols and surveillance

across Ireland's area of maritime interest, with enhanced capabilities.

The White Paper also stated that should additional funding become available, the development of a radar surveillance capability for the Air Corps is a priority. Funding for this is not specifically provided in the current resource envelope and any future decisions in this regard will be in the context of priorities having regard to the ongoing security environment and any associated developments. As outlined in the White Paper, the Air Corps's PC 9 aircraft provide a very limited air to air and air to ground capacity. Consideration of a more capable air combat intercept capability falls within the on-going Equipment Development Planning process, having regard to funding and other priorities. However, there are no plans to procure any such aircraft at this point.

Following a commitment given in the Programme for Government a Commission on the Defence Forces was established by Government in December 2020 and their report is expected soon. The Commission's terms of reference included the consideration of appropriate capabilities, structures and staffing for the Defence Forces. Their report will be fully considered when received and will inform decisions regarding the future development of the Defence Forces.

Defence Forces

108. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Defence if funding has been provided to organisations working with former Defence Forces and ex-service personnel; if so, the way the funding is being used; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3794/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department formally recognises two Veterans Associations which represent all former personnel. They are Óglaigh Náisiúnta na hÉireann (ONE), the Organisation of National Ex-Service Personnel, and the Irish United Nations Veterans Association (IUNVA).

My Department engages on an ongoing basis with these veterans' organisations and has entered into Service Level Agreements with them. An annual grant is paid to both ONE and IUNVA to assist in their overheads. ONE is currently paid an annual grant of €100,000 and IUNVA is paid an annual grant of €11,000.

As a further means of assistance, my Department has secured total funding of €500,000 under the Dormant Accounts Fund to assist ONE and IUNVA with specific special projects. Almost €300,000 was spent in 2021 while the remainder will be used to fund further special projects in 2022.

On 3rd October 2021, I officially opened ONE's new residential home which can accommodate 5 retired members of the Defence Forces and a Veterans Support Centre in Cobh, Co. Cork. This building was refurbished with funding from the Dormant Accounts Fund.

IUNVA used funding from the Dormant Accounts Fund in 2021 to pay for the development of a new United Nations museum at its headquarters in Mount Temple Road, Dublin 7. Other funding was used to purchase IT equipment for IUNVA posts.

In line with the commitment in the current Programme for Government, my Department continues to facilitate, where possible, the establishment of further ONE Veterans Support Centres (VSCs) around the country. VSCs are available to all veterans to seek support and advice, not just to ONE members.

On 29th November 2021, I officially opened the new building housing the Defence Forces

Personnel Support Service and ONE's Veterans Support Centre at Campfield, Collins Barracks, Cork. This project was funded by my Department and replaced a temporary Veterans Support Centre in the Cork Barracks.

Defence Forces

109. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Defence if he will report on the progress made in relation to the High-Level Implementation Plan for Strengthening our Defence Forces; when the completed project reports will be shared with Defence Forces representative associations in line with the request from the chairperson of the Defence Forces Conciliation Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3834/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Report of the Public Service Pay Commission (PSPC) on Recruitment and Retention in the Defence Forces was published on the 4th of July 2019. The Report was accepted in full by the Government at that time and an extensive High Level Plan titled "Strengthening our Defence Forces" was also agreed and published on the same date. The high level plan comprised 15 individual projects most of which have now been completed or at an advanced stage.

In the course of the work on the projects, reports and papers were produced that relate to the identification, examination and consideration of options that inform management deliberations, but do not necessarily in themselves represent final proposals or discussion documents for exchange with the Representative Associations. On that basis, it is not appropriate to provide the Representative associations with access to the contents of reports which are part of ongoing management deliberative processes. My Department will of course, continue to engage with the Representative Associations on all matters that fall within the scope of representation, once Official side proposals are finalised.

By way of an update on the status of the projects, four of them, relating to pay provided immediate benefits to PDF members totalling some €10m, as well as initiatives that will lead to further improvements. Also completed are projects on enhanced professional military education, bespoke leadership training, development of a mental health and wellbeing strategy, non-pay retention measures, consideration of the provision of additional specialist posts in certain areas, a review of technical pay groups and a review of recruitment processes. The Workforce Planning Project is being progressed through the joint civil/military Strategic Human Resources Group

The Review of Pay Structures project was intended to examine pay structures in the Permanent Defence Force and to fall under the public service pay agreement "Building Momentum". However, in the intervening period, one of the tasks set for the Commission on the Defence Forces was also to examine pay structures in the Permanent Defence Force. The recommendations of another project dealing with incentivised long service arrangements for certain Officer and NCO ranks, fell to be considered in the context of the sectoral bargaining element of "Building Momentum".

The project examining Barriers to Extended Participation in the PDF was split into two phases. Phase 1 focussed on reviewing mandatory retirement ages for Officers. A review has been completed by civil and military staff and their Report contains a number of recommendations for extension in service limits. The recommendations require consideration from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, in relation to the implications on costs and pensions.

Phase 2 examined the contracts of service and mandatory retirement ages for enlisted personnel. In December 2021, agreement was secured with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform which will allow for an extension in service limits for all Privates and Corporals to remain in service up to 50 years of age, subject to them meeting certain criteria including medical and fitness standards.

Arrangements were also secured which will allow for Sergeants to continue to serve beyond 50 years of age the details of which will be finalised following further discussions with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Other recommendations in this project will be considered in the forum of an Inter-Departmental Working Group, which the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform has established to consider mandatory retirement ages for all public service groups with fast accrual pension arrangements.

Defence Forces

110. **Deputy Cathal Berry** asked the Minister for Defence the position regarding discussions within his Department to enable sergeants who enlisted in the Permanent Defence Forces after 1 January 1994 to continue in service beyond 50-years of age; when an outcome of these discussions is likely; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3899/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): A civil/military review of mandatory retirement ages and service limits of all ranks in the Permanent Defence Force has been conducted. The recommendations arising from the review requires consideration from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, in relation to implications on costs and pensions.

I recently secured an agreement with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform which will allow an extension in service limits for Privates and Corporals, who were recruited to the Permanent Defence Force since 1 January 1994, to remain in service up to 50 years of age, subject to them meeting certain criteria including medical and fitness standards.

In addition, I also secured arrangements that will facilitate the extension of service limits of Sergeants recruited to the Permanent Defence Force since 1994. Details in relation to the proposal for Sergeants will be finalised following further discussions with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. There will also be discussions with PDFORRA, the representative association for enlisted personnel on this matter.

Question No. 111 answered orally.

Defence Forces

112. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Defence the engagement the Defence Forces have with the school system in the context of promoting the positive work carried out by the men and women of Óglaigh na hÉireann; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3866/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The military authorities have advised me that the Defence Forces regularly receive requests from schools for career talks and have themselves begun to actively engage with schools to conduct career talks. These talks generally cover career opportunities available in both the enlisted and commissioned ranks across the three services (Army, Naval Service and Air Corps). Career talks cover the day-to-day work of the Defence Forces to include ATCP (Aid to the Civil Power), ATCA (Aid to the Civil Author-

ity) and Overseas services and duties.

In addition, the Defence Forces Recruitment offices regularly attend events aimed at future career choices for schools such as transition year events and career guidance counsellor conferences.

Question No. 113 answered orally.

Naval Service

114. Deputy John Brady asked the Minister for Defence if he will consider awarding a patrol service medal to members of the Naval Service for extended periods of service at sea; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3894/22]

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

There are currently two medals that mark the service of personnel with either the Permanent Defence Force (PDF) or the Reserve Defence Force (RDF). The medal known as An Bonn Seirbhíse (The Service Medal) may be awarded to an officer, non-commissioned officer or private of the Defence Forces, or a member of the Army Nursing or Chaplaincy Service who possess the qualifying criteria for the award, as outlined in Defence Force Regulation A.9. Members or former members of the Army Reserve and Naval Service Reserve qualify for an Bonn Seirbhíse (Na hÓglaigh Cúltaca) (The Service Medal (Reserve Defence Force)) after 7 years service. The award of either of these medals to qualifying personnel reflects the service given by those personnel to either the PDF or the RDF as the case may be, and by extension the wider public, during the periods for which they served. Whilst acknowledging the significant role of all Defence Forces personnel to the security of the State, I am satisfied that these medals meet the need of marking service of personnel with either the PDF or RDF as the case may be, and I have no plans to introduce additional medals in this regard.

Additional mission specific medals, such as An Bonn Seirbhíse Idirnáisiúnta Oibríochta Óglaigh na hÉireann (The Defence Forces International Operational Service Medal) have been issued to personnel who have served on the humanitarian mission Op PONTUS in the Mediterranean. Subsequent missions to the Mediterranean as part of the EUNAVFOR mission (Op SOPHIA) have received authorised mission medals instead.

More recently, in June 2021, the Naval Service played a key role in tracking and identifying a fishing vessel which was carrying drugs estimated to be worth €220 million. The vessel was intercepted off the Canary Islands after the Naval Service had brought the ship to the attention of Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre – Narcotics (MAOC (N)) the EU anti-drugs agency. To recognise the work of the Defence Forces, in particular the Naval Service and Air Corps, I was delighted to see that they received the MAOC (N) Medal of Excellence for their role in assisting in the interception of Trans National Organised Crime vessels transporting drugs to Europe.

Defence Forces

115. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Defence the type of education supports that are provided to members of the Defence Forces such as those under the Military Education Strategy. [3640/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Training and education in the Defence Forces is conducted in line with national and international best practice, including the manner in which students are supported. On average, the Defence Forces conducts between 1,200 and 1,400 courses of training and education each year.

The Defence Forces is committed to the promotion of lifelong learning and the accreditation of Defence Forces training and education where appropriate. As such, the organisation has a number of collaborative partners across the Further and Higher Education sector including IT Carlow, Maynooth University, Munster Technological University and SOLAS. In addition to these partnerships, the Defence Forces operates a refund of fees scheme that facilitates personnel in accessing partial funding to pay for courses in which they are engaged in their own time.

The Defence Forces Policy on Specific Learning Difficulties (SLDs) provides information for Defence Forces training establishments, students and instructors on the supports available to personnel with SLDs. Guidance is available on disclosure, screening, teaching strategies, assistive technologies and assessment supports to be utilised. The Defence Forces has trained a number of Officers and Non Commissioned Officers as Student Liaison Officers to assist in the provision of these supports to personnel across the Defence Forces through the completion of a Level 9 Programme in Adult Guidance and Counselling. Defence Forces personnel are also supported to access further and higher education programmes through Recognition of Prior Learning and Work Based Learning Portfolios. These mechanisms allow access to programmes through non-traditional methods.

The Defence Forces has recently published its first formal Professional Military Education Strategy, covering the period 2021 to 2024. It builds on the Professional Military Education framework previously developed for Officer Ranks, as well as the annual Training and Education Directive.

The aim of the Professional Military Education strategy is to develop and maintain military capability by building on existing Professional Military Education concepts, incorporating ‘best practice’ approaches as utilised by other international military academies, Partner Nations, and national Higher Level Institutes in order to develop a future framework that clearly defines Defence Forces educational and career pathways, while also enabling an effective and progressive approach to the delivery of Defence Forces Education and Training needs. It will assist in ensuring that the Defence Forces attract, develop and retain high quality personnel and will underpin the capacity of the Defence Forces to fulfil the roles assigned by Government.

Defence Forces

116. **Deputy Cathal Berry** asked the Minister for Defence the position regarding the Commission on the Defence Forces report; when this report is expected to be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3898/22]

132. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Defence if he will provide an update on the work of the Commission on the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3186/22]

151. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Defence when the Commission on the Defence Forces will report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3769/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 116, 132 and 151 together.

The Programme for Government committed to the establishment of 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 and its terms of reference provide for their examining and making recommendations regarding the structures and size of the Defence Forces, defence capabilities, HR policies and strategies, the Reserve Defence Force, governance and high level command and control in the Defence Forces, and pay structures. 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

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.

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 also conducted site visits to military locations across the country, meeting nearly 1,000 military personnel. In addition the Commission 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 Commission are finalising their work with a view to completing their report as soon as possible. At that point the report will be fully considered. Given the significant issues provided for in the Commission's terms of reference, there will be a requirement for consultation with Ministerial colleagues on any matters that fall within their remit, and to consider the legal and governance implications of the Commission's recommendations where required. I will also be seeking the views of my Department and the Defence Forces. When these deliberations are completed I intend to revert to Government with a proposed plan of action.

As the Deputy will appreciate, in advance of the publication of the report and the subsequent consideration of its recommendations, it would be inappropriate for me to engage in speculation regarding any of the Commission's potential recommendations or the response to those recommendations.

Departmental Budgets

117. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which the defence budget was underspent in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3822/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): For 2021, the total allocation provided to the Defence Sector was €1,072 million, comprising some €262 million for Vote 35 (Army Pensions) and €810 million for Vote 36 (Defence). The provisional end of year figures indicate that there was an overall Defence Sector gross underspend of over €25 million in 2021, approximately 2% of the Defence Sector allocation.

Expenditure under the Army Pensions Vote is essentially demand-driven and non-discre-

tionary and a gross underspend of over €2 million occurred in 2021. This underspend arose mainly due to less personnel exiting the Defence Forces than was originally estimated.

The provisional outturn for the Defence Vote indicates a gross underspend of €23 million for 2021. This has arisen mainly due to pay savings as the Defence Vote is funded on an annual basis for a target strength of 9,500 Permanent Defence Force (PDF) personnel, whereas the actual strength is somewhat below that figure.

In previous years, with the consent of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, such pay savings were reallocated to address spending pressures elsewhere in the Defence Vote subheads and across the Defence Sector Votes. However in 2021, similar to many other Public Service organisations, the impact of COVID-19 and supply chain difficulties has limited the extent to which my Department was able to re-direct these savings.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, there was significant capital spending of some €129 million in 2021 on the ongoing upgrade and replacement of essential military equipment and the development of the Defence Forces built infrastructure. This level of expenditure, despite significant Covid 19 and other supply chain challenges, highlights my commitment to ensuring the Defence Forces have the capabilities necessary to enable them to fulfil all roles assigned by Government, both at home and overseas. Additionally, for 2022, the provision of the significant funding allocation of over €1.1 billion emphasises this Government ongoing commitment to the Defence Sector.

The Deputy will be aware that the Government established an independent Commission on the Defence Forces in December 2020. The Commission are finalising their work with a view to completing their Report as soon as possible. The Commission's Report, when submitted, will be fully considered at that point.

Commemorative Events

118. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Defence the planned timeline for publication from the Military Service 1916-1923 Pension Collection; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3902/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Military Service (1916-1923) Pensions Collection (MSPC) project is a joint Department of Defence and Defence Forces contribution to the Decade of Centenaries. The MSPC owes its origins to the decision of the Oireachtas of Saorstát Éireann in June 1923 to recognise and compensate wounded members, and the widows, children and dependents of deceased members of Óglaigh na hÉireann, including the National Forces, the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Republican Army and the Irish Citizen Army through the payment of allowances and gratuities. Over time, provision was enhanced and broadened to include members of the Hibernian Rifles, Cumann na mBan, Fianna Éireann and certain members of the Connaught Rangers. Two streams of legislation are relevant to the material in the collection:

- The Army Pensions Acts from 1923 to 1953
- The Military Service Pensions Acts, 1924, 1934 and 1949.

The MSPC project is mandated to preserve and make available the files and records of the Department of Defence dealing with the service of qualifying members of these organisations from the period April 1916 to the 30th of September 1923. This involves cataloguing and digitising in the region of 275,000 files.

To date, there has been eleven releases of material under the MSPC project, the latest release was in November 2021. Since the first release of material in 2014, more than 108,000 files have been individually catalogued by the MSPC team, with over 38,000 scanned files currently fully downloadable online. All releases of records from MSPC and the online resources are hosted on the Military Archives Website (www.militaryarchives.ie).

The Military Service Pension Collection (MSPC) has been key to some of the most dynamic recent research on the Irish revolutionary period and the records contained in the collection provide invaluable historical information that captures first-hand accounts of the experiences of the individuals involved in this defining period of Irish history. Each release of material from this collection reveals previously unknown or forgotten experiences of those involved in events of that time. The continued digitisation and release of material from this collection presents the public with the opportunity to research information about their ancestors and their community during the period leading up to the establishment of Irish independence.

Looking forward, the MSPC project will continue to digitise and release additional material. For 2022, it is planned that two further releases of material will take place during the year and planning is underway for a third publication from the MSPC Project. At present, it is expected that this planned publication will be ready for release in Quarter 4 of this year.

The records in the MSPC are an important source for the history of the twentieth century Ireland as a whole and the planned publication will further explore the collection and consider the role of the collection into the future. Since the first release of material from this extensive historical collection it is clear that the records capture aspects of the lived experience in twentieth century Ireland and the collection contains many thousands of otherwise unrecorded voices.

Defence Forces

119. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Defence the steps he is taking to improve reporting mechanisms for Defence Forces personnel experiencing sexual abuse, harassment and bullying. [3631/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): A key priority for me as Minister for Defence is my duty of care obligation to all members of the Defence Forces. I am fully committed to ensuring that every member has the right to be treated with dignity, equality and respect to carry out their duties in a safe workplace underpinned by a culture of zero-tolerance for any kind of bullying, discrimination, harassment or sexual abuse.

As the Deputy is aware I announced this week the establishment of an Independent Review to examine issues relating to unacceptable behaviour in the workplace. The Independent Review will

- examine current legislative frameworks, policies, procedures and practices,
- assess the pervading culture in the workplace, and on the basis of this work,
- make recommendations on measures and strategies required to underpin a workplace based on dignity, equality mutual respect, and duty of care for every member of the Defence Forces.

A number of reforms have been implemented over the last twenty years since the 2002 publication of the External Advisory Group on the Defence Forces and the three subsequent reports from the Independent Monitoring Group (IMG). for addressing allegations of inappropriate behaviour, including harassment, sexual harassment and bullying, which are contained in policy

documents and in regulation.

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

Despite the reforms that have taken place, current and former members of the Defence Forces have been clear that the culture that is pervading, and the application of those policies, systems and procedures for dealing with unacceptable behaviour have not, and are not serving all Defence Forces personnel well.

It is of critical importance therefore that I proceed with this Review to ensure that the workplace is safe for all serving members.

Question No. 120 answered orally.

Defence Forces

121. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Defence the way that he plans to resolve the issue in relation to the Siege of Jadotville to the satisfaction of the surviving Irish soldiers involved and the families of those who have passed away; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3865/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The siege of Jadotville was a prominent event that occurred during Ireland's peacekeeping mission in the Congo in September 1961 where "A" Company, 35th Infantry Battalion, came under attack. From the 13th to the 17th September the men of "A" Company endured almost continuous attack. At the end of the Siege, the men were taken into captivity until finally released on the 25th October 1961.

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

Notwithstanding the actions that have been taken to date to recognise and honour the valiant actions and bravery of all of the men stationed at Jadotville sixty years ago, an Independent Review Group (IRG) was established to examine and report on matters relating to recommendations for military medals relating to events at Jadotville. The IRG completed its research in July 2021 and has submitted its report. The work of the Independent Review Group has now concluded.

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

The deeply unsettling aftermath of Jadotville is detailed in the report as is the lack of personal welfare supports afforded to the men following events at Jadotville, their period in captivity and upon their return home. I have apologised to veterans and to their families on behalf of the State and the Government to the men of 'A' Company, 35th Infantry Battalion and to their families for the lack of necessary supports or deserved recognition of their valiant service on

their return from the Congo and for the many issues that arose as a result, some of which had tragic consequences. I have also acknowledged that the lack of supports in place at that time is extremely regrettable. There have been great steps in the intervening years to support Defence Forces personnel, their families and veterans through the work of the Defence Forces personnel support services.

As a matter relating to the IRG recommendations is currently before the courts, it would not be appropriate for me to provide any further information in relation to the various recommendations made by the IRG at this time.

Question No. 122 answered orally.

Defence Forces

123. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence his plans to improve residential accommodation for the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3622/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): As the Deputy may be aware it has been a long standing policy, since the 1990's that the provision of Married Quarters to serving Defence Forces personnel would be discontinued. This move away from this provision was accepted by senior military management at the time and it is not intended to reverse this policy. Single Living in Accommodation is provided for personnel where same is required for training and operational purposes.

The modernisation of such accommodation features significantly in the Defence Forces 5 Year Infrastructure Plan, which has seen the completion of the following refurbishment projects at a combined cost of €11.2m:

- Blocks B & D Pearse Barracks, DFTC ;
- Block 7 Plunket Barracks, DFTC ;
- Blocks 1 & 2 Cathal Brugha Barracks; and the
- Apprentice Hostel, Casement Aerodrome.

The following accommodation projects are now also being progressed at combined estimated value of €26.5m :

- Refurbishment of Blocks 4 & 8 , Naval Service,
- New accommodation Block in Collins barracks, Cork, and
- the refurbishment of the USAC accommodation Block in Renmore, Galway.

Question No. 124 answered orally.

Defence Forces

125. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence if he intends to immediately increase the allocated associated budget given the recent commentary regarding the Defence Forces rations and the increasing cost of food. [3833/22]

126. **Deputy Cathal Berry** asked the Minister for Defence if he is satisfied with the daily ration rate for enlisted personnel in the Defence Forces; if it is in line with best practice within the European Union; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3900/22]

137. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence his views on reports that the Defence Forces are attempting to feed members for just €4.20 per day; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3892/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 125, 126 and 137 together.

Defence Forces personnel may avail of daily meals in certain circumstances. This includes personnel engaged in security duties, approved training courses, on operational exercises and single personnel living in barracks.

I am advised that a daily ration rate is set by the military authorities and that this rate is used as a budgeting figure by military cooks when supplying meals to personnel. The rate is currently €4.20 per day.

The rate was originally calculated based on a scale of provisions determined to deliver nutritionally balanced meals with recommended levels of essential food groups and having regard to the cost of such food to the Defence Forces and economies of scale that are achieved. I am advised that the rate has been adjusted over time to provide for inflation.

The Office of Government Procurement has put framework contract arrangements in place for major food procurements for the Defence Forces and other public service bodies. The centralised framework contract arrangements allow for the procurement of fish, dairy, frozen foods, meat, poultry, fruit and vegetables, bread and eggs. Average annual expenditure in this area in the three years 2019 to 2021 has been €3.2 million.

The military authorities have advised me that the daily ration rate will be reviewed having regard to the re-tendering of OGP food contracts, a process which is currently underway. I also note that PDFORRA have raised this matter and their views will be considered.

Question No. 126 answered with Question No. 125.

Departmental Data

127. **Deputy Cathal Berry** asked the Minister for Defence the funds returned unspent to the Exchequer from his Department in 2020 and 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3897/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): On an annual basis, the Defence Sector budget, comprising of Vote 35 (Army Pensions) and Vote 36 (Defence) is determined within the overarching budgetary framework and approved by Dáil Eireann, having regard to the level of resources available and defence policy requirements, with multi-annual capital envelopes determined as part of the overarching National Development Plan.

Tables 1 and 2 below outline Defence and Army Pensions expenditure in 2020 and 2021

Table 1 - 2020

-	Vote 35 Army Pensions €m	Vote 36 Defence €m
Gross Estimate	259.1	781.0
Gross Outturn	251.0	780.9
Gross Savings	8.1	0.1
Additional A-in-As	0	6.1
Net Exchequer Surrender	8.1	6.2

Table 2 - 2021

-	Vote 35 Army Pensions €m	Vote 36 Defence €m
Gross Estimate	262.6	809.8
Gross Outturn	260.1	786.5
Gross Savings	2.5	23.3
Additional A-in-As	0	6.1
Net Exchequer Surrender	2.5	29.4

It is important to note that Appropriation's-in-Aid (A-in-A's) cannot be used as an additional source of funding. Under Government Accounting Rules, any additional A-in-A's above the estimate must be surrendered to the Exchequer.

Expenditure under the Army Pensions Vote is essentially demand-driven and non-discretionary and a gross underspend of €8.1 million arose in 2020 and €2.5 million in 2021. This arose mainly due to less personnel exiting the Defence Forces than was originally estimated. In any given year, it is very difficult to predict accurately the exact number of voluntary early retirements from the Defence Forces with entitlement to immediate payment of retirement benefits.

There was a gross underspend of €0.1 million on the Defence Vote in 2020 while the provisional outturn for 2021 indicates a gross underspend of €23 million. This underspend in 2021 is mainly attributable to pay savings which arose due to the actual strength numbers being below the target establishment strength of 9,500 Permanent Defence Force (PDF) personnel. In previous years, with the consent of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, such pay savings were reallocated to address spending pressures elsewhere in the Defence Vote subheads and across the Defence Sector. However in 2021, similar to many other Public Service organisations, the continued impact of Covid-19 and supply chain difficulties has limited the extent to which my Department was able to re-direct these savings.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, there was significant capital spending of over €129 million in 2021 on the ongoing upgrade and replacement of essential military equipment and the development of the Defence Forces built infrastructure. This level of expenditure, despite huge Covid-19 and other supply chain challenges, highlights my commitment to ensuring the Defence Forces have the capabilities necessary to enable them to fulfil all roles assigned by Government, both at home and overseas. Additionally, for 2022, the provision of the significant funding allocation of over €1.1 billion emphasises this Government ongoing commitment to the Defence Sector.

The Deputy will be aware that the Government established an independent Commission on the Defence Forces in December 2020. The Commission are finalising their work with a view to completing their Report as soon as possible. The Commission's Report, when submitted, will be fully considered at that point.

Defence Forces

128. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Defence if he will report on the progress made by his Department in providing support for Defence Forces veterans in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3633/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department provides support to veterans through two recognised Veterans Associations. These Veterans Associations, which represent all former personnel, are Óglaigh Náisiúnta na hÉireann (ONE), the Organisation of National Ex-Service Personnel, and the Irish United Nations Veterans Association (IUNVA). ONE has branches in Cork City and Cobh while IUNVA has posts in Cork City and Fermoy.

ONE provides board and lodgings for 54 ex-service personnel in 4 residential homes in Dublin, Letterkenny, Athlone and Cobh, Co. Cork, while IUNVA accommodates 4 retired personnel in its home on The Curragh. In addition, ONE currently has 13 Veterans Support Centres (VSCs) nationwide, while IUNVA operates drop-in centres at 8 of its 22 posts around the country.

My Department engages on an ongoing basis with these veterans' organisations and has entered into Service Level Agreements with them. An annual grant is paid to both ONE and IUNVA to assist in their overheads and, in line with the commitment in the current Programme for Government to "support the establishment of centres for members of the Defence Forces", my Department continues to facilitate, where possible, the establishment of further ONE Veterans Support Centres and IUNVA Posts around the country.

As a further means of assistance, my Department has secured total funding of €500,000 under the Dormant Accounts Fund, to assist ONE and IUNVA with specific special projects. On 3rd October 2021, I officially opened the new residential home, which can accommodate 5 retired members of the Defence Forces and a Veterans Support Centre at 8 Harbour Row, Cobh, Co. Cork. This building was refurbished with funding from the Dormant Accounts Fund. ONE has plans to establish another VSC and hostel to accommodate 6 retired veterans in Cork City. This will bring to 60 the number of retired veterans that ONE will be able to accommodate.

On 29th November 2021, I officially opened the new building housing the Defence Forces Personnel Support Service and ONE's Veterans Support Centre at Campfield, Collins Barracks, Cork. This project was funded by my Department and replaced a temporary Veterans Support Centre in the Cork Barracks.

EU Agreements

129. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Defence the new initiatives that are anticipated within the European Union as tension mounts in many sectors globally. [3861/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Strategic Compass initiative, which has its origins in the Council Conclusions on security and defence from June 2019, aims to enhance and guide the implementation of the Level of Ambition arising out of the EU's Global Strategy. It is envisaged that the Strategic Compass will set out policy orientations and specific goals and objectives in areas such as crisis management, resilience, capability development and partnerships. EU Member States have, over the last number of years, worked together on its further development with the adoption of a finalised version of the Compass expected in March of this year.

The first draft of the Strategic Compass was presented by HRVP Borrell to Foreign and Defence Ministers in a joint session of the Foreign Affairs Council in Foreign Affairs and Defence format on 15th November 2021. The draft set out an analysis of the prevailing strategic environment, followed by proposals in the areas of crisis management, resilience, capability development and the EU's work with key partners.

Ireland has, and continues to play an active role in efforts to develop the EU's Strategic Compass. Once agreed by all Member States, this policy document will serve to guide the EU's approach towards CSDP for the next decade, while also reflecting the increasingly complex security landscape faced by the EU. There are many proposals within the Strategic Compass which may lead to tangible future initiatives, but these remain under discussion by all Member States and are yet to be agreed.

Ireland has always engaged constructively in the development of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

From Ireland's perspective, we welcome the Strategic Compass as a means of setting out our shared strategic vision as a Union for the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and of enhancing the role of the EU as a security provider that can contribute effectively to international peace and security.

In my view, the Strategic Compass also offers an important opportunity for the EU to project its values. In my discussions with other Member States, I have therefore suggested that the starting point for the Compass, should be the core values that underpin our approach to CSDP, including our collective commitment to effective multilateralism and the rules-based international order. In this regard, the exercise offers an excellent opportunity to strengthen the EU's cooperation with the United Nations, including in the areas of peacekeeping and crisis management.

Defence Forces

130. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Defence the number of non-commissioned members and commissioned officers of the Defence Forces that have retired or resigned in each of the past five years; the progress made to date in addressing the pay issues in the Defence Forces which has led to an exodus of members from the forces; when a decision will be made on the application by an organisation (details supplied) to affiliate with another organisation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3294/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): There are many reasons why individuals leave the Defence Forces, which includes: retirement on reaching mandatory age limits, completion of service, individual personal circumstances, other career opportunities, ill health, failure to meet fitness and medical standards, etc.

Discharge figures, outlined in the table below, details the number of non-commissioned members and commissioned officers of the Defence Forces that have retired or resigned, in each of the past five years. These figures include General Service recruits, who left before completing their training.

Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Officer	76	57	70	35	31
Other Ranks	666	683	812	601	643

Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total	742	740	882	636	674

The Defence Forces are paid increases in pay and allowances in line with Public Service pay agreements. 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. In addition, fixed periodic pensionable allowances and allowances in the nature of pay were also increased by 1% on this date.

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 annualized basic salaries for all public servants of 1% or €500, whichever is greater on, 1st October 2022. Fixed periodic pensionable allowances and allowances in the nature of pay will also be increased by 1% on this date, as well.

In addition to the general round of pay increases, members of the Permanent Defence Force have also benefitted from the implementation of increases in Defence Forces allowances as recommended by the Public Service Pay Commission in 2019.

The Government remains fully committed to addressing pay and conditions in the Defence Forces. The Commission on the Defence Forces, which was established by Government, includes in its terms of reference, 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 shortly 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

As provided in the Programme for Government, I will then consult with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform on the establishment of a permanent pay review body, reflecting the unique nature of military service in the context of the Public Service.

PDFORRA initiated legal proceedings in June 2020, in respect of their request to affiliate with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. As this matter is now Sub-judice, it would not be appropriate to comment further.

Defence Spending

131. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Defence the way Ireland's defence spending as a share of national income compares with other neutral members of the European Union; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3818/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Expenditure on the Defence Forces is managed through Defence Vote 36, with all operational outputs delivered from a single set of forces encompassing the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service. Defence Vote 36 provides funding for the pay and allowances of members of the Defence Forces, civilian employees and Departmental staff, ongoing Defence Forces operational and standing costs, the acquisition of military equipment along with the development of Defence Forces built infrastructure. It also

provides funding for Civil Defence and the Irish Red Cross Society. Separately, Vote 35 provides for expenditure on Military Pensions.

On an annual basis, the Defence Group budget is determined within the overarching budgetary framework and approved by Dáil Eireann, having regard to the level of resources available and defence policy requirements. Capital funding allocations are also framed by the multi-annual National Development Plan.

International comparison of military expenditure are made difficult by the lack of publicly available data, and by the breadth of difference between nations in their international security and defence policies. In addition, there is no EU requirement for Ireland to achieve any specific percentage of GDP target in relation to Defence expenditure, nor is there any agreement at EU level in this regard. It should also be noted that the CSO, in introducing Modified Gross National Income (GNI*), have recognised that the figures for Ireland's GDP are significantly impacted by the effects of globalisation.

As such, the international perspective is best used for context rather than comparison between militaries.

Against that background and using the latest data published by the European Defence Agency, details on defence spending as a % of GDP across EU Member States in 2019 indicates the level of Irish expenditure on defence, at 0.5% of GNI* , is lower than other neutral EU states such as Austria, Sweden, Finland, Malta, and Cyprus.

However, it is worth noting that within the resources allocated to Defence, the Defence Forces make a significant contribution to domestic security, provide a broad range of supports to the civil authorities, undertake roles such as Emergency Aeromedical Support (EAS) and fishery protection and are widely respected for their contribution to international peace and security. Ireland provides a level of support to the UN that, relative to the size of our Defence Forces, exceeds that of many countries. For this, we can be justifiably proud.

The Government remains committed to ensuring that the Defence Forces have sufficient funding to deliver assigned roles, both at home and overseas, in line with priorities as set out in the White Paper on Defence (2015) and the 2019 White Paper Update.

The Deputy will also be aware that the Government established an independent Commission on the Defence Forces in December 2020. The work of the Commission encompasses the consideration of appropriate military equipment capabilities, structures and staffing, and their report will inform decisions regarding the future development of the Defence Forces. The Commission are finalising their work with a view to completing their Report as soon as possible. The Commission's Report, when submitted, will be fully considered at that point.

¹ *defined as EU Non-NATO MS.*

Question No. 132 answered with Question No. 116.

Defence Forces

133. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Defence the action that is being taken to improve recruitment and retention of staff in the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3796/22]

134. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Defence the plans that are in

place to strengthen the Naval Service in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3821/22]

136. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Defence when the Naval Service will reach its approved establishment strength; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3820/22]

142. **Deputy Kieran O’Donnell** asked the Minister for Defence if he will report on the work to improve recruitment and retention of personnel in the Defence Forces with a focus on presenting the option of a career in the Defence Forces to school leavers. [3917/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): As at 31 December 2021, the strength of the PDF was 8,468 whole time equivalent personnel comprised of 6,841 Army, 876 Naval Service and 751 Air Corps. There is an establishment of 9,500 personnel for the Permanent Defence Force, 7,520 for the Army, 1,094 for the Naval Service, and 996 for the Air Corps.

While the Government remains committed to returning to and maintaining the agreed strength of the Permanent Defence Force across all three services at 9,500 personnel, there are a number of factors, some of which are hard to predict, that will impact on the timeframe within which this will be achieved. The on-going staffing challenges in the Defence Forces have been acknowledged and a range of measures have been taken to tackle them.

There is ongoing recruitment, which has resulted in 576 personnel being inducted in 2021. I launched a recruitment campaign specifically targeting potential Naval Service recruits in June 2021. 78 Naval Service personnel were inducted in 2021 comprised of 65 recruits, 8 cadets, 3 Direct Entry specialists and 2 re-joining enlisted personnel.

The 2022 Recruitment Plan is not yet finalised. However the Defence Forces remain committed to optimising the number of personnel inducted in 2022 and target General Service Recruits, Cadets, Air Corps Apprentice Aircraft Technicians and specialists for the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service. The Defence Forces are actively engaged in providing career talks within schools and participate in relevant events such as career guidance counsellor conferences and transition year events.

The scope of direct entry competitions, along with their terms and conditions, continue to be expanded and revised to improve intakes, and the re-entry campaign for former members of the PDF continues.

In relation to retention, there has been significant progress on pay arising out of increases due from recent pay agreements, the most recent of which was a 1% increase on annualised salaries or €500, whichever was greater, on the 1st October 2021, with further increases to follow. There are now Service Commitment schemes active in both the Air Corps and the Naval Service, and a special Naval Service tax credit for sea-going personnel remains available in 2022.

In addition, in light of the particular challenges faced by the Defence Sector, the Government tasked the Public Service Pay Commission (PSPC) to undertake a comprehensive review and analysis of underlying difficulties in recruitment and retention in the Defence Forces. The recommendations of this report have been progressed through a series of specific projects.

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

Additionally, the Commission on the Defence Forces are finalising their work with a view to completing the report as soon as possible. The Commission’s Report, when submitted, will

be fully considered at that point and will inform future decisions regarding the Defence Forces.

My focus remains on retaining and restoring the Permanent Defence Forces to its full capacity.

Question No. 134 answered with Question No. 133.

Cybersecurity Policy

135. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Defence the role played by Defence Forces personnel in the preservation of Ireland's cybersecurity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3632/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Cyber security is an issue with very significant implications for governmental administration, for industry, for economic wellbeing and for the security and safety of citizens. It is a standing item on the agenda of the Government Task Force on Emergency Planning which I Chair where it is always a key topic of discussion.

The response to cyber threats is a whole-of-Government challenge, with the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications taking the lead role and with inputs in the security domain from An Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces.

The National Cyber Security Centre, which is part of the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications, is the primary authority responsible for cyber security in the State, including incident response, cyber resilience and information provision. While the primary role of the Defence Forces with regard to Cyber Security relates to the defence and security of its own networks and systems, the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces are committed to participating, under the leadership of the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications, in the delivery of measures to improve the Cyber Security of the State. This is being done in line with the Programme for Government commitment to implement the National Cyber Security Strategy, recognizing the potential and important role of the Defence Forces.

Department officials and members of the Defence Forces are actively involved in the implementation of the National Cyber Security Strategy which, in conjunction with the White Paper on Defence 2015, will continue to inform our engagement in this critical area. This includes work to develop an updated, detailed risk assessment of the current vulnerability of all Critical National Infrastructure and services to cyber-attacks and the secondment of a member of the Defence Forces to the Cyber Security Centre of Excellence in Tallinn, Estonia. My Officials were also part of the steering group that developed a Baseline Cyber Security Standard for Government Departments and Agencies and they participate in the UK-Ireland Critical National Infrastructure Cyber Cooperation Working Group. My officials also actively participate on the Inter-Departmental Committee overseeing the overall implementation of the National Cyber Security Strategy.

In addition, the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces have a Memorandum of Understanding and a Service Level Agreement with the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications to provide support in the area of national cyber security. The overall aim is to improve the cyber security of the State through various types of assistance and support while also ensuring the operational requirements of the Defence Forces are prioritised, including the ongoing sharing of information and analyses of risks.

Question No. 136 answered with Question No. 133

Military Neutrality

138. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Defence further to Parliamentary Question No. 236 of 20 January 2022, his views on whether support for deeper EU-NATO cooperation including in regions outside the European Union is in conflict with a policy of military non-alignment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3919/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland's traditional policy of military neutrality is characterised by non-membership of military alliances. Rather than interpreting neutrality as meaning that Ireland should stand aside, successive Irish governments have considered that neutrality enhances our reputation internationally and enables us to engage more effectively in our efforts to promote peace and development through the UN, the European Union and our own bilateral actions.

As I stated previously in respect of any deepening European Union and NATO links, it is my view that, as an active participant in NATO Partnership for Peace, Ireland should continue to welcome greater EU-NATO co-operation where it contributes to international peace and security and is focused on avoiding duplication of structures, systems and interoperability standards. This ensures better coherence and effectiveness on the ground in peace support and crisis management operations.

The international defence and security agenda is a busy and evolving one, with the threats and challenges we collectively face growing in recent years. In the context of addressing and indeed tackling these challenges, Ireland is a committed multilateralist and greatly values the contribution that we can, and do make, through our membership of the European Union and the United Nations.

Naval Service

139. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Defence if consideration is been given to using Galway Port along with Dún Uí Mhaoilíosa, An Rinn Mhór, Gaillimh as a base for the Naval Service in the west of Ireland in view of its central location on the west coast; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3293/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Deputy may be interested to note that there is currently a programme of infrastructure works taking place at the Naval Base in Haulbowline with the objective of increasing the berthage capacity in the Dockyard Basin at Haulbowline to meet the requirements of the Naval Service fleet.

This programme of works includes:

- Upgrading of Spencer Jetty- works at an advanced stage and due for completion in the coming weeks at an estimated cost of €2.7m;
- Dredging of the Graving Dock- sampling and analysis is currently underway with the main dredging works expected following on from same at an estimated cost of €2.5m excl VAT;
- Further development of the West Wall to facilitate additional berthage.

My Department has not been advised of any current operational requirements for the use of Galway Port as a base for the Naval Service. If future operational requirements of this nature arise, they will be considered.

Defence Forces

140. **Deputy Cathal Berry** asked the Minister for Defence if the Defence Forces are in a position to contribute to operational measures with European Union partners in the event of Russian military aggression against Ukraine from a capability perspective given the outcomes of the most recent European Commission meeting on 16 December 21 at which the European Union expressed readiness to coordinate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3896/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): At its meeting on 16 December 2021, the European Council adopted conclusions which stressed the urgent need for Russia to de-escalate tensions caused by the military build-up along its border with Ukraine. The Council also reiterated its full support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and noted that "any further military aggression against Ukraine will have massive consequences and severe cost in response, including restrictive measures coordinated with partners." The Council urged diplomatic efforts to achieve the full implementation of the Minsk Agreements.

Earlier this week, the Foreign Affairs Council, in which I participated, adopted conclusions noting that "the EU has accelerated the preparatory work" on a "wide array of sectoral and individual restrictive measures that would be adopted in coordination with partners" in the event of "any further military aggression by Russia against Ukraine". These conclusions condemned Russia's continued aggressive actions and threats against Ukraine and called on Russia to de-escalate. Ministers concurred that the EU should continue with diplomatic efforts to convince Russia to take the path of dialogue and tasked the High Representative to keep coordinating the EU position with key partners like the US, NATO and OSCE.

Ireland strongly supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, a position we have repeatedly reaffirmed at the UN Security Council meetings on Ukraine and in EU meetings, including at a meeting of EU Defence Ministers on 12 January and meetings of EU Foreign Ministers on 13/14 January and on 24 January.

The Deputy will be aware that the deployment of contingents of the Defence Force on overseas military operations must be approved under an appropriate resolution of the United Nations Security Council and is subject to Government and Dáil Éireann approval as appropriate. In considering any mission, the Government takes many factors into account including the capability requirements of the operation and the capacity of the Defence Forces to discharge the mandate of the operation. The Deputy will note the strong emphasis by the EU on diplomatic efforts to de-escalate the current situation and, as such, the issue in question does not arise at this time.

Defence Forces

141. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Defence the number of Defence Forces personnel currently based in Dundalk, County Louth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3825/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The overall Defence property portfolio

consists of a diverse range of facilities from conventional military barracks to forts, camps and training lands. In addition, the Naval Base, Haulbowline, Co. Cork and Casement Aerodrome, Baldonnell, Dublin 22 are also permanently occupied military installations.

For operational and security reasons, details of the staffing levels and the staffing capacity located at each military installation, including Dundalk, County Louth cannot be disclosed. It should be noted however that the number of personnel stationed at a particular location will frequently vary on an on-going basis, as it is a normal operational feature for there to be a constant through-flow of personnel into and out of military installations on an ongoing basis.

Question No. 142 answered with Question No. 133.

Departmental Expenditure

143. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence his Department's capital expenditure in 2021; the way this compared to profile as originally set out for the year; and the planned capital expenditure for 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3623/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The level of capital funding allocated to my Department allows the Defence Organisation to undertake a programme of sustained equipment replacement and infrastructure development across the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service. It also demonstrates the Government's commitment to ensuring that the Defence Forces have the capabilities necessary to deliver on all their assigned roles, both at home and overseas.

The capital allocation for the Defence Vote 36 in 2021 was €131 million. The provisional end of year figures for 2021 indicate a capital expenditure outturn of €129 million. Although this expenditure is marginally behind profile, it should be noted that ongoing Brexit, Covid and other related supply chain issues were a constant challenge throughout 2021.

For the period to 2025, the National Development Plan has allocated multi-annual funding of €566 million to Defence, with an allocation of €141 million provided for 2022. Many of the Defence Equipment projects are complex, multi-annual and have long lead-in times, so the funding certainty now provided by the National Development Plan is particularly welcome, as it will enable the Defence Forces to plan, prioritise and deliver on scheduled projects over the coming years.

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

- The Land Forces Capability Development and Force Protection Programmes, including an upgrade of the military transport fleet and next generation radio communications and signal equipment;
- The ongoing Naval Service Vessel Renewal and Replacement Programme, which includes the mid-life refit of the P50 Class of Naval Vessel and the progression of the Multi Role Vessel project;
- The ongoing Air Corps Aircraft Renewal and Replacement Programme which includes the purchase of the C295 Maritime Patrol Aircraft.

A significant number of Defence infrastructural projects will also be advanced under the Defence Forces Built Infrastructure Programme, including the:

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

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

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

This level of funding demonstrates the Government's commitment to Defence and will boost ongoing efforts at modernising and upgrading Defence equipment platforms and built infrastructure.

The Deputy will be aware that the Government established an independent Commission on the Defence Forces in December 2020. The work of the Commission encompasses the consideration of appropriate military equipment capabilities, structures and staffing, and their report will inform decisions regarding the future development of the Defence Forces.

The Commission are finalising their work with a view to completing their Report as soon as possible. The Commission's Report, when submitted, will be fully considered at that point.

Defence Forces

144. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Defence the timeline for completion on Project 88 under the white paper funding study; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3901/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The White Paper on Defence sets the defence policy agenda over a ten year planning horizon and covers all aspects of defence within overall security policy. Since publication of the White Paper, a total of 95 separate projects have been identified for completion over a ten-year period. Project and Programme Management Governance arrangements were put in place to monitor the ongoing status of individual projects and to review the scope of projects within the programme.

Project 88 is one of these projects and it's objective is to place defence funding on a sustainable multi-annual footing in a way that captures expected long term costs and the unique nature of defence procurement, and that allows for step changes in provision.

Work on the project has been on-going through a joint Civil/Military project team and it is expected to complete this project in the first half of this year.

International Agreements

145. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the role the Naval Service will have in the recently announced Atlantic Current and Evlanov Sea basin Marine Protected Area and the North-East Atlantic Environment Strategy to 2030. [3832/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am aware of Ireland's approval of the International Agreement highlighted by the Deputy and I congratulate my colleagues Ministers O'Brien and Noonan and their team for securing such an agreement during Ireland's chairmanship of the OSPAR Commission.

The OSPAR Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic is a legally binding treaty through which Ireland and 14 other countries, plus the European Union, collaborate, and develop and coordinate actions in order to ensure the sustainable

use and ongoing protection of the North-East Atlantic environment. Neither military or defence matters, nor fisheries management, come under the remit of the OSPAR Convention.

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage are the responsible Department for all matters relating to the OSPAR Convention.

The North Atlantic Current and Evlanov Sea basin marine protected area (NACES MPA) and the North-East Atlantic Environment Strategy 2030 (NEAES 2030) constitute two key deliverables of the 2021 Ministerial meeting under the 1992 OSPAR Convention, which took place in Portugal in October last.

The North Atlantic Current and Evlanov Sea basin MPA is situated in mid-Atlantic area beyond national jurisdiction waters, in other words in the High Seas. While this important site for marine birds lies within the OSPAR Maritime Area, it lies far beyond Ireland's maritime area.

The Naval Service is the State's principal sea-going agency tasked with a variety of defence and other roles. While the main 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, it also carries out a number of other non-fishery related tasks such as search and rescue, diving operations, drugs interdiction as well as many more. 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.

There appears to be little direct role to be played by the Naval Service as a result of the recently announced NACES MPA. However my Department looks forward to further engagement with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on this matter if required.

Question No. 146 answered orally.

Question No. 147 answered with Question No. 133.

EU Meetings

148. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Defence if he will report on his most recent meeting with European Union defence ministers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3185/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I attended the recent Informal meeting of EU Defence Ministers which took place between the 12th and 13th of January in France.

This meeting consisted of three working sessions; a Working Dinner with NATO and the UN on the topic of "Interferences and actions of state and non-state actors in our operational theatres", a Working Session on "Safeguarding the EU's strategic interests in contested domains: focus on outer space" followed by a Working Lunch of Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence to discuss the Strategic Compass. Defence Ministers also received a short Current Affairs briefing which touched on topics such as the situation at the Ukrainian border and the European Security Architecture, as well as the situation in Mali.

The working dinner, in which I participated, was also attended by United Nations Under-Secretary General for Peace Operations Jean-Pierre Lacroix and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, as well as the Chair of the Sub-Committee of the European Parliament on Security and Defence (SEDE) Nathalie Loiseau MEP. The discussion focused on the threats posed by various mercenary groups - notably the Wagner Group - in Libya, Syria, Ukraine and Central

African Republic for example, with the discussion invited to focus on the threats faced, ways to tackle it, and concrete proposals on how to strengthen CSDPs operational effectiveness in that context. I took the opportunity to express Ireland's deep concern at the increasing engagement of both State and non-State actors in a number of countries where the EU has been working to improve peace and security and their negative impact on CSDP missions and operations. The NATO Secretary General also took the opportunity to debrief EU Defence Ministers on that day's meeting of the NATO-Russia Council.

The working session on 'Safeguarding the EU's strategic interests in contested domains: focus on outer space', took place in the framework of the ongoing work on the Strategic Compass, with discussions focusing on the increasing threats and challenges faced (in the context of an EU Space Strategy for Security and Defence); how to react to hostile behaviours in space, how to protect space related assets and how space services best serve security and defence, in particular situational awareness for our CSDP missions and operations.

The joint working lunch between Foreign Affairs and Defence Ministers focused on the first revised text of the Strategic Compass, which was presented to Ministers by the High Representative/Vice President, Josep Borrell. Ministers provided their first reactions to the revised text with a view to providing guidance for further work within the Council, to ensure that the Strategic Compass is both ambitious and actionable prior to its adoption in March. Ireland welcomed the progress on the Strategic Compass as set out in the revised draft and urged a continued emphasis on multilateralism and the importance of the EU-UN strategic relationship.

Air Corps

149. Deputy Catherine Connolly asked the Minister for Defence the details of the engagement he or officials from his Department have had in 2021 and to date in 2022 with the Department of Transport in relation to exploring the option of the Air Corps providing some element of the next generation search and rescue service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3921/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): As this House is aware, there is currently a project ongoing under the remit of the Department of Transport, to consider, develop and bring to fruition a new Coast Guard aviation contract for future service provision. As part of this project the Department of Transport convened an inter-Departmental/Agency Steering Group of which both the Department of Defence and the Air Corps were members.

A strategic assessment and preliminary appraisal document in line with the Public Service Code was brought to Government for information in July 2020. This preliminary appraisal, which included an appraisal of various service delivery options, was compiled by the Department of Transport's Project Team in conjunction with KPMG, and was shared with the Steering Group before going to Government in summer 2020. The preliminary work included an appraisal of the options of the State assuming full responsibility for the service, either through the Air Corps or a dedicated Irish Coast Guard Aviation Branch. Both options were ruled out for a variety of reasons but notably the risks to the State and questions around potential affordability and deliverability.

I agreed with the strategic assessment and preliminary appraisal and I confirmed then, as I do again now, that I did not see the Air Corps taking full responsibility for search and Rescue (SAR) aviation services in Ireland's SAR domain. However, given the Air Corps' historic role in SAR provision, at the end of 2020 I asked Defence officials to engage further with the Department of Transport to explore the option of the Air Corps providing some element of the

next generation SAR aviation service while at the same time ensuring that the service meets domestic and international obligations for SAR and represents value for money for the State.

There was proactive and realistic engagement between the Defence Organisation and the Department of Transport Project Team during the first 6 months of 2021. This included the consideration of the option of the Air Corps providing some element of the helicopter and fixed wing SAR service as part of the Transport Project Team's detailed appraisal and business case. The option which included the Air Corps providing an element of the helicopter and fixed wing SAR service did not emerge as the preferred option.

In July 2021, the Government agreed to commence the formal procurement process for a new Coast Guard aviation service. The decision was based on the detailed appraisal and business case prepared in accordance with the Public Spending Code. The Government also agreed that the Department of Defence, working in conjunction with the Irish Coast Guard, would examine whether the fixed wing element of the proposed service could be delivered by the Air Corps in line with the requirements and parameters set out in the business case.

Additional project time was afforded for these further discussions to take place which concluded in October 2021 with a fixed wing proposal submitted to the Department of Transport. Whereas it was decided not to initially proceed with the full Air Corps proposal, provision has been made within the procurement process which provides for the Air Corps to undertake the fixed wing element of the service at the appropriate time should the Air Corps have the capacity and availability to provide this service.

It has been important that a full and realistic consideration is made of all of the viable options available to the State. I am satisfied that this is the approach that has been taken.

Both the Naval Service and the Air Corps currently provide support to the Coast Guard on a request and availability basis.

Civil Defence

150. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Defence the status of the implementation of the policy document, Civil Defence – Towards 2030; if consideration will be given to greater resourcing of its emergency response efforts and particularly in assisting during times of flooding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3793/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Civil Defence is a statutory volunteer based organisation which supports the Principal Response Agencies i.e. An Garda Síochána, the HSE and Local Authorities.

The Department of Defence is responsible for the development of Civil Defence at national level. In this context my Department provides policy direction, centralised training through the Civil Defence College, administrative support, guidance and centralised procurement of certain items of uniform and equipment in support of local authority Civil Defence efforts.

Civil Defence services are delivered through the Civil Defence Officer (CDO) of the relevant local authority area. The local authority has overall responsibility for the day to day operations.

In September 2020 the Government published 'Civil Defence - Towards 2030'. This important policy document was prepared following a wide-ranging consultation with a variety of stakeholders including volunteers, local authorities, Civil Defence Officers and Principal

Response Agencies. The document states that the five core services of Civil Defence going forward are Emergency Response, Search and Rescue, Medical Response, Community Assistance and provision of a Radiation Monitoring Service.

The implementation of 'Civil Defence - Towards 2030' is ongoing. The actions arising from 'Civil Defence - Towards 2030', fall both with the Department of Defence and the local authorities. As part of this process there are regular meetings with the Inter Agency Guidance Team, the City and County Managers Association to review implementation of 'Towards 2030' and other Civil Defence related matters.

Civil Defence's emergency response is set out within each respective local authority Major Emergency Plan, this includes supporting the local authority in times of flooding through Civil Defence Auxillary Fire Service units and swift-water teams. The local authority has overall responsibility for the day to day operations within their respective area.

In respect of funding, Civil Defence is financed by a combination of grants from the Department of Defence as well as funding from local authorities. The annual operational grant provided by the Department covers up to 70% of the running costs of the Civil Defence Unit with the Local Authorities providing a minimum of 30%.

In 2022, my Departments budget for Civil Defence nationally is €4,640,000. In addition €500,000 has been allocated to Civil Defence from the Dormant Accounts Fund. The Dormant Accounts funding is being used to upgrade the Civil Defences vehicle fleet. The Government is committed to providing adequate funding to allow Civil Defence fulfil its role as set out in 'Towards 2030'.

Question No. 151 answered with Question No. 116.

Work Permits

152. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if an application by a person (details supplied) for a work permit will be expedited. [3981/22]

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 for the person concerned (in the details supplied) was received on 26th July 2021. On 25th November 2021 it was refused for several reasons which were as follows: -

- Failure to fully comply with the requirements of the Labour Market Needs.
- Failure to provide a copy of a statement issued by the Revenue Commissioners showing the monthly statutory return made by the person who is making the offer of employment dated within the 3-month period preceding the application.
- Failure to provide copy of Signature Pages displaying MYWork-ID that matches that of the online application form.
- Failure to provide a copy of Contract of Employment signed by both parties to the General Employment Permit application.

The applicant was informed of the refusal reasons and of their right to request a review of the refusal decision which must be submitted on the prescribed review form available on the

Department's website within 28 days of issue of the refusal decision. A link to the prescribed review form available on the Department's website was also included in the decision letter that issued.

As the Employment Permits Section of the Department did not receive a request for a review of the refusal decision within the specified timeframe it is no longer possible to consider a review in this case. The applicant was informed of this on 18th January 2022.

The refusal to grant an employment permit does not preclude an applicant from submitting another application for an employment permit. Such an application should comply with all of the legislative requirements for the particular employment permit type.

Information in relation to the Labour Market Needs Test is available on the Department's website and can be accessed through this link enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Workplace-and-Skills/Employment-Permits/Employment-Permit-Eligibility/Labour-Market-Needs-Test/.

A Checklist Document has been prepared to assist applicants when applying for a General Employment Permit application and this can be accessed on the Department's website at enterprise.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/General-Employment-Permits-Checklist.pdf.

Applications for employment permits are dealt with in date order. Applicants can keep track of Employment Permit applications current processing dates at enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Workplace-and-Skills/Employment-Permits/Current-Application-Processing-Dates/. 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 and must be accompanied by a compelling business case which details the individual circumstances involved.

Enterprise Support Services

153. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if there is a form of funding that can be applied for by a person that works as a personal trainer and that wishes to establish a community gym which will deliver fitness, health and wellness programmes as well as inclusive classes and fitness programmes for persons with disabilities; if funding can be made available for such a facility; if he will take into consideration that the availability of all-inclusive gyms for persons with disabilities is limited in County Tipperary; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4004/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): I would encourage any person looking to start, expand or pivot their business to contact their Local Enterprise Office as they provide a 'first stop shop' for all available Government business supports. In regard to a business operating in the health and fitness sector, such as a gym mentioned in the detail, it should be noted that the Local Enterprise Offices do not ordinarily provide direct grant-aid to areas such as retail, personal services, local professional services, gyms/local building services, as it may give rise to the displacement of existing businesses.

However, the Local Enterprise Offices do provide a wide range of high-quality business and management development programmes that are tailored to meet specific business requirements. Whether it is starting a business or growing a business there is something suitable for anyone exploring self-employment as an option.

In particular, I would encourage the person to enquire about the Start Your Own Business

Programme. The objective is to assist clients in assessing their business idea, its viability and helps them decide if they should proceed or take a step back. The programme covers topics such as Starting up / getting started, Identifying, understanding, and researching your target market, Developing your Business Plan amongst other vital areas of interest to a new business.

I would also suggest seeking the advice of a LEO Business Mentor; the Mentor programme is open to both new and existing businesses located within the Local Enterprise Office region and is designed to match up the knowledge, skills, insights and entrepreneurial capability of experienced business practitioners with small business owner/ managers who need practical and strategic one to one advice and guidance. The mentor contributes independent, informed observation and advice to aid decision making. Mentors can also advise on finance options available to entrepreneurs and can assist with applications and referrals to Micro-Finance Ireland, which provides vital support to eligible microenterprises by lending to businesses that cannot obtain loans from other commercial lenders and who do not meet the conventional risk criteria applied by commercial lenders. It offers loan funding, including Start-up Loans, from €5,000 to €25,000.

It should be noted that the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) provides some funding to social enterprises as defined by the National Social Enterprise Policy 2019 – 2022, with a view to complementing mainstream business supports.

Support may also be sought from Local Development Companies (LDCs), which are volunteer-led multi-sectoral partnerships, delivering community and rural development from a bottom-up perspective. Local Development Companies are located throughout Ireland, in every local authority area.

Departmental Data

154. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his Department has commissioned any polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies within the remit of his Department for the period 1 January 2021 to date; if so, if he will provide details of the policies; the costs incurred for each individual poll; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4041/22]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department has not commissioned polling of the general public relating to any existing or proposed policy developments for the period January 2021 to date.

Work Permits

155. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will clarify the situation regarding the availability of visas and work permits for persons in the construction industry; the policy approach by his Department in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4117/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): The State's employment permit system is designed to supplement Ireland's skills and labour supply over the short to medium term by allowing enterprises to recruit nationals from outside the EEA, where such skills or expertise cannot be sourced from within the EEA at that time.

The system is, by design, vacancy led and managed through the operation of the occupation lists: the critical skills list in respect of skills that are in critical shortage in the labour market and the ineligible occupations lists for which a ready source of labour is available from within Ireland and the EEA.

Changes to the employment permit occupations lists are made where there are no suitable Irish/EEA nationals available, development opportunities are not undermined, genuine skills shortage exists rather than a recruitment or retention problem and Government education, training and economic development policies are supported.

The occupations lists are subject to twice yearly evidence-based review and take account of research undertaken by the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SOLAS) and the Expert Group of Future Skills Needs (EGFSN), a public consultation process, input from the relevant policy Departments and the Economic Migration Inter-Departmental Group, chaired by the Department. Account is also taken of contextual factors such as Brexit and, in the current context, COVID 19.

The most recent review concluded on 27th October. To alleviate continued shortages in construction, to assist in the deliver on the National Planning Framework objective of 33,000 new homes per annum until 2030 and to deliver on our Climate Action targets, an additional 8 construction sector categories of occupation were made eligible for a general employment permit.

These newly eligible roles are for Electricians; Masons; Roofers, Roof Tilers and Slaters; Plumbers and Heating and Ventilating Engineers; Carpenters and Joiners; Floorers and Wall Tilers; Painters and Decorators; and Construction and Building Trades Supervisors.

This essentially ensures that almost all construction roles can access the employment permit system.

Flexible Work Practices

156. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the status of the implementation of the required legislation for the national remote working strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4156/22]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The National Remote Work Strategy identified 15 actions to be undertaken to ensure that remote work is a permanent feature of the Irish workplace in a way which maximises its economic, social and environmental benefits.

An Interdepartmental Group (IDG), coordinated by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE), provided oversight to the implementation of the Strategy. The IDG included representation from key Government Departments, State Agencies and relevant public bodies. The IDG met four times over the course of 2021 to drive the coordination and implementation of the report's actions. Significant progress has been made in implementing the actions in the Strategy in the year since its launch.

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

On 25 January the Government approved the priority drafting of the Right to Request Re-

mote Work Bill 2021 and the submission of the General Scheme to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment to seek early commencement of pre-legislative scrutiny.

I look forward to discussing this important proposal with the Joint Oireachtas Committee as soon as possible and the Bill will be progressed through the Oireachtas as quickly as possible thereafter.

Energy Prices

157. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications further to Parliamentary Question No. 110 of 19 January 2022, the way his Department plans to ensure the €100 payment is reflected in a saving for tenants given that tenants are more in need of the saving than landlords and that there are many landlords with the prepaid power account for a tenant's home in their name and in this case the payment will go into the landlords account; and if a landlord can receive more than one €100 payment for multiple properties. [3986/22]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Government has approved the publication of legislation to establish the Electricity Costs Emergency Benefit Scheme under which a payment of €100 will be credited to around 2.1 million domestic electricity accounts up to a maximum of €215 million. The scheme is due to become operational by the end of quarter one.

With the support of the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage, my Department is working closely with the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) to ensure that those due the payment in rented accommodation receive the benefit of this payment. I understand, there are c.300,000 tenancies registered with the RTB and that the majority of these tenants would either hold their own electricity account, or would pay their landlord for their electricity based on an actual bill, and would therefore receive the benefit directly. My Department is working with the RTB on a public information campaign to ensure that any tenants, expected to be a small minority, for whom electricity costs are not separate from overall rental cost are aware of the scheme and entitlements. In that context, in the event that a dispute should arise, between a tenant and landlord, there are existing dispute resolution mechanisms provided by the RTB.

Energy Conservation

158. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the efforts being made to reduce the waiting time and clear the backlog of applications pending under the warmer home schemes; if expediting of applications on medical need can be considered at this time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4029/22]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme delivers a range of energy efficiency measures free of charge to low income households vulnerable to energy poverty. It is administered by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). Since the scheme started, over 143,000 homes have received free upgrades. The average cost of the energy efficiency measures provided per household in 2021 was €17,100, an increase of approximately €1,000 per home since 2020. In order to qualify for support, applicants must own and live in their home which must have been built and occupied before 2006 and must be in receipt of certain social welfare payments. Health status is not part of the eligibility criteria for the Scheme.

The average wait times were impacted by COVID-19 related restrictions on construction activity in place for periods during 2020 and 2021 when the scheme was fully paused in line with Government guidelines. Wait times have also been impacted by challenges associated with availability and longer lead in time for materials. The SEAI has also advised that wait times may vary, based on a number of issues. For instance, once the survey is completed and works are allocated to a contractor, the time to complete works is dependent on a number of factors including the scale of works to be completed, access to the property, availability of materials, weather and in recent years COVID-19 public health restrictions.

There are currently just over 7,000 homes awaiting works on the Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme work programme, a reduction of approximately 300 since December 2020. This includes homes that are: currently undergoing works; have been allocated to contractors for works; have completed an initial home survey and are awaiting allocation to a contractor or are awaiting the initial survey of their home. The SEAI aims to significantly reduce the waiting list in 2022, on the basis of working first on homes that are longest on the waiting list.

SEAI data indicates that for homes completed to date in 2021, the average time from application to completion was approximately 26 months. For the same period, the average time for a surveyor to be allocated was approximately 18 months, a reduction of five months since December 2020.

Budget 2022 has allocated €202 million for residential and community retrofit this year. Over half of this (€109 million) will be used to provide free energy efficiency upgrades to households in the Warmer Homes Scheme. In addition, delivery capacity in the supply chain has increased due to a new, broader contractor panel that commenced at the end of 2020. I have also secured additional resources to expand the capacity of the SEAI to deliver the scheme. SEAI received additional funding in Budget 2021 which delivered an increase of 30 staff across the organisation and Budget 2022 is providing funding for a further 30 staff this year. Every effort is being made to maximise output since construction activity in the residential sector recommenced in mid-April 2021.

The Deputy may wish to note that there are other grants and schemes available from Government that could assist homeowners if there is an urgent need. These include the Department of Social Protection (DSP) Urgent Needs Payment available through the Community Welfare Service at local DSP offices and the grants funded by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to support housing adaptation and upgrade for older persons and people with a disability.

Departmental Data

159. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if his Department has commissioned any polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies within the remit of his Department for the period 1 January 2021 to date; if so, if he will provide details of the policies; the costs incurred for each individual poll; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4042/22]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department undertakes regular and ongoing consultation with the general public on a broad range of policy matter.

The consultation papers are published on the Department's website.

Data on use of polling or other methods as part of our broad range of public engagements and

consultation is not held centrally.

The data is being compiled and will be forwarded to the Deputy as soon as possible.

National Broadband Plan

160. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the options available regarding broadband at a location (details supplied); the status of the implementation of the National Broadband Plan; the steps his Department has taken in relation to full capacity fibre-to-the-cabinet broadband; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4109/22]

Awaiting reply from the Department.

Renewable Energy Generation

161. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the funding that is available for domestic solar panels; when funding will be in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4147/22]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland administers the grant scheme to assist homeowners to install solar PV panels. The scheme was launched in July 2018. The table below outlines the applications received and financial supports under the scheme, as of 31st December 2021. The 2022 Exchequer allocation is €14 million.

Year	No. of applications	Value of applications supported
2019	1,820	€4,266,405
2020	2,916	€7,353,320
2021	4,089	€9,435,125

Solar PV is also funded under the Communities Energy Grant Scheme, which makes grant funding available to improve the energy efficiency of the building stock, and is open to domestic and non-domestic applications. Latest available figures show that in 2020, 137 domestic applicants received support for solar PV installations under this scheme.

Bus Services

162. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport if he will consult with the National Transport Authority and a company (details supplied) to review the bus timetables of the services 59 and 111 serving Dalkey, Loughlinstown, Killiney and Dún Laoghaire to include a service that caters for school children attending schools, in view of the fact that there is currently no timetabled service that coincides with the finishing times of these schools resulting in many more cars on the road impacting traffic and emissions unnecessarily; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3980/22]

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

The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally and for the scheduling of these services in conjunction with the relevant transport operators.

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.

Rail Network

163. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Transport if he will request Irish Rail to update its timetable on the Ballybrophy rail line to include a service during lunchtime; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3987/22]

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

The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally and for the scheduling of these services in conjunction with the relevant transport operators.

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.

Rail Network

164. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Transport the reason that no funding has been given from funds (details supplied) to upgrade the Ballybrophy rail line; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3988/22]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I can confirm to the Deputy that track relaying on the Ballybrophy line is provided for within this year's Infrastructure Manager Multi-Annual Contract (IMMAC) work programme.

As the Deputy is aware, last year 7.5miles of track was relayed on the line, leaving a total of 12 miles outstanding. This year's work programme planned an additional 4miles to be relayed by the end of the year; however, consideration is now being given to expediting the delivery of the programme to ensure that the entire outstanding 12miles is completed in 2022 and I am hopeful that will be achieved this year.

Bus Services

165. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the operation of the 17A bus route by a company (details supplied) as the buses are consistently late or do not show; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4031/22]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): While as Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport, I am not involved in the operations of public transport. It is the National Transport Authority (NTA) that has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally

and for the scheduling of these services in conjunction with the relevant transport operators.

I have, therefore, forwarded the Deputy's question, regarding the operation of the 17A bus route, to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Bus Services

166. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Transport his views on whether it is prudent to allow a company (details supplied) to operate the new N4 and N6 route replacing the 17A if it cannot manage a much reduced timetable at present; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4032/22]

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

The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally and for the scheduling of these services in conjunction with the relevant transport operators.

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.

Departmental Data

167. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department has commissioned any polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies within the remit of his Department for the period 1 January 2021 to date; if so, if he will provide details of the policies; the costs incurred for each individual poll; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4053/22]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department has not commissioned any polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies within the remit of my Department for the period 1 January 2021 to date.

Rail Network

168. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport the status of funding to complete necessary repairs at Clongriffin DART station; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4086/22]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure in the Greater Dublin Area, including in co-operation with Iarnród Éireann, the DART rail network.

Noting the NTA's responsibility in the matter, I have referred the Deputy's question to the NTA for a more detailed reply on the specific DART station referred to by the Deputy. Please

contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 days.

Road Projects

169. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Transport if he will report on plans for the western orbital route that would link the N81 to the N4 via the N7; and if funding has been allocated. [4101/22]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for overall policy and exchequer funding in relation to the National Roads Programme. Once funding arrangements have been put in place with Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 and in line with the new National Development Plan (NDP), the planning, design and construction of individual national roads is a matter for TII, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. This is also subject to the Public Spending Code and the necessary statutory approvals.

In this context, TII is best placed to advise on the current plans in relation to an N81/N4/N7 link.

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.

Military Exercises

170. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport if he was informed by the Irish Aviation Authority regarding its role in the context of Russian plans to conduct artillery drills off the Irish coast (details supplied). [4136/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): Management of Irish Air Traffic Control Airspace is a matter for the Irish Aviation Authority (IAA). I can confirm that the IAA informed my Department of its plans to manage airspace capacity in the Southern Oceanic Transition Area, in response to the notification by the Russian authorities of their intention to undertake military exercises in that area. Such management measure will be undertaken in coordination with the Network Manager, Eurocontrol, and will create a flight restriction for the affected area along with an accompanying buffer zone to ensure the safety of civil aircraft operations.

Military Exercises

171. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Transport the number of times that the Irish Aviation Authority has been informed of military exercises by foreign military or naval services affecting Irish-controlled airspace in the past ten years; the countries involved; the number of notifications from each country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4160/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The Irish Aviation Authority are best-placed to provide the Deputy with the relevant information, and accordingly I have referred the Deputy's question to them for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Customs and Excise

172. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Finance when the decision was made that An Post would recoup VAT charges (details supplied); if this service was tendered to other service providers; the rationale behind these additional costs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4003/22]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that across the European Union, electronic Customs import declarations are now required for all consignments coming from non-EU countries including those coming through the postal system regardless of the value of the goods being sent. This includes consignments coming from the UK. The requirement for electronic import declarations for postal consignments came into force on the 1 July 2021. This is an EU requirement across all Member States and is necessary to protect public health, to ensure food safety and product standards and to protect EU businesses from unfair international competition thus preserving jobs for European workers including Irish workers.

Consignments from outside the EU cannot be delivered to the importer without the submission of an electronic Customs declaration and the payment of any taxes and duties due. The importer may complete these procedures themselves but generally, private individual importers appoint a representative such as a courier company or a postal operator to complete these Customs procedures on their behalf. It is this representative who becomes liable for the Customs debt at the point of import.

These representatives do not act on behalf of, nor do they collect the relevant taxes and duties on behalf of Revenue, but rather they act on the behalf of the importer and assist the importer in the clearance of their goods imported from outside the European Union. As this is a commercial arrangement between the importer and the representative, the matter of a tender process doesn't arise.

The rate of Customs Duty which is owed is dependent on the origin and type of goods contained within the consignment. The rate of VAT applied is the rate which would be applied for the supply of similar goods in Ireland.

Departmental Data

173. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department has commissioned any polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies within the remit of his Department for the period 1 January 2021 to date; if so, if he will provide details of the policies; the costs incurred for each individual poll; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4043/22]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I wish to inform the Deputy that my Department has not commissioned any polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies for the period 1 January 2021 to date.

Tax Credits

174. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance if he has considered increasing the single parent carer credit in line with the increase in the individual tax credit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4078/22]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The general position is that tax expenditures are considered as part of the annual Budget and Finance Bill process.

As the Deputy will be aware, Budget 2022 included a significant tax package amounting to a cost of €520 million. 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 income earners was also introduced. Furthermore, the 2% rate band ceiling for USC was also 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/.

Having regard to the fiscal demands and pressures facing the State in 2022, it was not possible to increase all tax credits and remain within the fiscal parameters. However, the tax changes introduced in Budget 2022, will benefit all income earners who pay income tax, including those persons in receipt of the Single Person Child Carer Credit, and are aimed at helping taxpayers at a time when prices are rising. I would also note that those in receipt of this credit may also have entitlement to an increased standard rate band each year which is €4,000 higher than that which applies to a single person who is not entitled to the credit.

In all the circumstances, I am satisfied that the Single Person Child Carer Credit in its current form is appropriately calibrated at present and there are no immediate plans to review or amend the credit.

Banking Sector

175. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Finance the position of the Government with regard to Irish banks, particularly those that are largely in State hands, freezing or suspending the accounts of customers who conduct personal banking with Iran-based bank accounts. [4100/22]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Deputy will be aware that Banks are designated persons under the Criminal Justice (Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing) Act 2010, and consequently have Anti-Money Laundering / Countering the Financing of Terrorism (AML/CFT) obligations to meet under that legislation. In meeting these obligations, banks are required to adopt a risk based approach as to how they conduct their business and who they conduct it with. I therefore have no role in influencing the risk tolerances banks should accept in this area and consequently cannot direct them as to what approach they should adopt.

Additionally, Irish banks are subject to the provisions of Council Regulation (EU) No. 267/2012 of 23 March 2012 and Council Regulation (EU) No 359/2011 of 12 April 2011 which impose restrictive measures (sanctions) in relation to Iran and the individuals listed in their annexes.

My officials contacted the three banks in which the State has a shareholding and received the following responses:

AIB

“The bank may freeze or suspend accounts for any customer where required to do so to meet regulatory or legal requirements”

PTSB

“ In line with our terms & conditions and in order to ensure we meet our overarching obligations in terms of the prevention of money Laundering/terrorist financing and compliance with Sanctions; PTSB does not process any payments to or from Iran-based bank accounts”

Bank of Ireland

“ Bank of Ireland is a diversified Financial Services Group which adheres to all legislative and regulatory requirements applicable in each of the jurisdictions in which it operates. These include all requirements emanating from the European Union, HM Treasury, United Nations and US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control.

“In line with Department of Finance guidelines in relation to country and geographic risks for money laundering and terrorist financing, country risk is not solely related to the country of origin of a customer but also takes into account business links or other links the customer may have to a particular country. “As such, when financial institutions within this jurisdiction, including Bank of Ireland, consider a country to be a high risk jurisdiction for the purposes of their AML and sanctions policies, it requires enhanced monitoring to be conducted, in accordance with their legal obligations.”

Banking Sector

176. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the terms of settlement made by a bank (details supplied) in proceedings taken by members of a group; if he will outline the terms; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4123/22]

177. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the fact that €75 million has been set aside by a bank (details supplied) to deal with the position of investors who for financial, business or other personal reasons could not participate in litigation against the bank; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4124/22]

178. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Finance his views on whether the sum of €75 million is inadequate to reimburse members of a fund (details supplied) who had invested for financial, business or other personal reasons and could not participate in litigation against a bank for the losses incurred by them in the settlement with the bank; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4125/22]

179. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Finance the action he proposes to take to restore the reputation of a bank (details supplied) and fully reimburse members who invested in a fund and who for financial, business or other personal reasons could not participate in litigation against the bank; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4110/22]

182. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the fact that a fund (details supplied) has been referred to by a person as a legacy issue; the actions that will be taken to support investors who invested in the fund who for financial, business or other personal reasons could not participate in litigation against the bank given that they are continuing to suffer serious continuing financial losses and distress; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4113/22]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 176, 177, 178, 179 and 182 together.

As the Deputy may be aware, as Minister for Finance, I have no role in the commercial decisions made by any bank in the State. This includes banks in which the State has a shareholding.

Decisions in this regard are the sole responsibility of the board and management of the banks which must be run on an independent and commercial basis. The independence of banks in which the State has a shareholding is protected by Relationship Frameworks which are legally binding documents that cannot be changed unilaterally. These frameworks, which are publicly available, were insisted upon by the European Commission to protect competition in the Irish market. The AIB Relationship Framework is available to view on my Department's website.

My officials contacted AIB and received the following response:

"AIB is undertaking a review of all investments in the property funds, known as Belfry, sold between 2002 and 2006. Each investment is examined on a case by case basis to determine if redress may be due in certain instances. The bank is continuing to communicate with Belfry investors to make them aware of this review, to provide progress updates and to advise a dedicated contact point for any queries. AIB is focused on completing its review of these legacy investments in a timely manner. Based on initial assessments, a provision of €75 million has been taken for the anticipated cost of redress and other related costs that may be payable. This was set out in a note in AIB's H1 2021 accounts.

"In July 2021, the bank settled legal claims from approximately 270 investors in Belfry Funds. A provision amounting to €25 million was taken at that time in relation to this settlement and the associated costs."

Question No. 177 answered with Question No. 176.

Question No. 178 answered with Question No. 176.

Question No. 179 answered with Question No. 176.

Banking Sector

180. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Finance if he has been in communication with the Central Bank and the other regulatory authorities in relation to the losses incurred by those who invested in a fund (details supplied) and who for financial, business or other personal reasons could not participate in litigation against the bank; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4111/22]

181. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Finance the action the Central Bank and the other regulatory bodies have or propose to take against a bank (details supplied) and the relevant officers of the bank resulting from a settlement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4112/22]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 180 and 181 together.

I thank the Deputy for his questions. Officials from my Department contacted the Central Bank of Ireland and received the following response:

"The Central Bank intervenes, within the scope of its regulatory mandate, to ensure the interests of consumers and investors are protected by focusing on the issues that pose the greatest potential or actual risk of harm to consumers and investors. We require firms to put things right where they have made errors or cause consumer or investor harm, and through our continuing

supervision of firms, we monitor the investigation and provision of redress and compensation for consumers and investors, where appropriate.

“We are aware of the decision by AIB to establish a programme to review all investments in the Belfry Funds on a case-by-case basis to determine if redress may be due in certain instances, as per its disclosure, which states inter alia *“The Group has instigated a programme, which is ongoing, to review all investments in the Belfry funds on a case by case basis and to determine if redress may be due in certain instances.”* All investors are included in the review without any action required by them at this time. AIB has written to all investors and has committed to communicating with them throughout the programme to advise on progress and the outcome of the review.

“As you will be aware, due to supervisory confidentiality obligations under national legislation (Section 33AK of the Central Bank Act, 1942) and EU law, we are unable to provide you with any information about our specific supervisory engagement with individual firms. However, please be assured that we have made clear our expectations of all regulated firms, that consumers and investors are treated in a fair and transparent way, and that firms fully comply with both regulations and our supervisory expectations. If consumers or investors have queries in relation to their Belfry Funds, they should contact AIB directly at *belfryenquiries@aib.ie*.”

Question No. 181 answered with Question No. 180.

Question No. 182 answered with Question No. 176.

Financial Services

183. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the reason the levels of compensation or redress with respect to complaints made against a pension provider under subsections 4 and 5 of section 61 of the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman Act 2017 are less than that with respect to other financial service providers; the rationale for the provision that redress shall not exceed any actual loss of benefit under the scheme concerned in subsection 5 of section 61; if he or his Department have considered amending this provision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4216/22]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Firstly, I must point out that the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO) is independent in the performance of his statutory functions. I have no role in the day to day workings of the office or in the decisions which he takes.

The redress that can be directed by the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman is outlined in the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman Act 2017, as amended (‘the Act’).

In drafting this legislation, my Department reviewed the legislation underpinning the Pensions Ombudsman (the Pensions Act 1990, inserted by the Pensions (Amendment) Act 2002), and the Financial Services Ombudsman, (Part 7 of the Central Bank Act 1942, as inserted by the Central Bank and Financial Services Authority of Ireland Act 2004). In a number of areas the different treatment of the two respective categories of Financial Services and Pensions was maintained.

Therefore, different rules continue apply in relation to financial redress in respect of financial services and pension providers which reflects the different characteristics of pension products and other financial products and services.

However it is important to note that financial redress is not the only option available to the FSPO to address complaints in relation to financial services and pension providers. The objective of the Office is broader than the provision of financial redress.

The role of the FSPO is to resolve complaints from consumers through independent, fair, impartial, confidential and free service. For some consumers this may be an informal process, for others it may involve mediation, investigation, decision and settlements or redress.

While there is no plans to amend the FSPO Act at this time, the Department continually reviews all consumer protection legislation, including the FSPO Act, under our remit to ensure that a comprehensive framework is in place which provides adequate protections for consumers in respect of regulated financial services.

Covid-19 Pandemic

184. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his views on whether members of An Garda Síochána are doing vital work during the pandemic and that they are public facing; if he made a case for their inclusion in the Covid pandemic bonus payment in this context; if so, the details of the case he made; if not, the reason; and if he plans to pursue the issue via the Government appointed panel. [4097/22]

185. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will consider in relation to the Covid recognition payment including other workers that have also had to attend work throughout the lockdown periods such as security guards. [3977/22]

186. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will consider in relation to the Covid recognition payment including other workers that have also had to attend work throughout the lockdown periods such as catering workers that fed staff and patients throughout the pandemic. [3978/22]

187. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will consider extending the €1,000 bonus to prison officers who continued to work all through the pandemic and who would be responsible for bringing prisoners into hospitals and remaining with them for their stay in hospital (details supplied). [4008/22]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I propose to take Questions Nos. 184 to 187, inclusive, together.

There are many thousands of people across the country who went above and beyond over the course of the last two years. The continued contribution of so many people in all walks of life has been essential to getting us through this difficult time. Collaboration and solidarity have been the hallmark of our national approach to COVID-19 and the measures announced on 19 January are true to those principles.

After careful consideration, the Government made the decision to give all the people of Ireland a national day of recognition and commemoration on the 18th of March this year, and another permanent public holiday in February commencing in 2023.

The Government took many factors into consideration when coming to a decision in relation to any additional recognition measure for specific sectors, however it ultimately agreed that acknowledging certain frontline healthcare workers in the public sector and in private nursing homes and hospices in particular was the most fair and appropriate, whilst acknowledging all other healthcare workers and sectors with the public holidays.

This is a balanced package of measures that will benefit all workers across the economy, while also recognising in particular the risks faced by certain frontline healthcare workers during this pandemic.

Question No. 185 answered with Question No. 184.

Question No. 186 answered with Question No. 184.

Question No. 187 answered with Question No. 184.

Departmental Data

188. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his Department has commissioned any polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies within the remit of his Department for the period 1 January 2021 to date; if so, if he will provide details of the policies; the costs incurred for each individual poll; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4049/22]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I wish to advise the Deputy that no policy specific polling of the general public has been conducted by my Department during the period specified. This is also the case for the Office of Government Procurement, which is also part of my Department.

Weather Events

189. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the reason that there are only 25 entries from Ireland on the global database on extreme weather events EM-DAT for the period 1900-2021 while many of the proposed entries by EM-DAT appear empty, for example, the cost of damages, lives lost and so on in the context of the national long-term climate action strategy required under section 3(2)(d) of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 (as amended); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4161/22]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): My Department does not hold the information referred to, nor have responsibility in this area. The matters are more appropriately directed to the Departments of Environment, Climate and Communications and Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Weather Events

190. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the work underway regarding the monitoring of extreme weather events; if he will report on the impact of same on social, economic and environmental and heritage losses on a functioning database similar to the EM-DAT, the global database on extreme weather events, in the context of the national long-term climate action strategy required under section 3(2)(d) of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 (as amended); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4162/22]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): My Department does not have responsibility for the areas referred to. These matters come under the remit

of the Departments of Environment, Climate and Communications and Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Flood Risk Management

191. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the way in which he intends to remedy those cases in which the loss of social, economic or environmental and natural heritage occur from flooding in the context of the national long-term climate action strategy that is required under section 3(2)(d) of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 (as amended), for flood mitigation which is not deemed suitable to be financed through a cost-benefit analysis; the relief that will be offered to those that will and already are experiencing adverse impacts as a result of flooding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4163/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): Managing Ireland's flood risk is a long-term commitment, requiring a multi-sectoral approach through both capital infrastructural measures and non-infrastructural measures.

Before I provide you with some information on the humanitarian assistance available from a number of sources in the worst case situation of properties affected by flooding, I would like to give you a broader context of the policies and investment in place to protect people and properties from future flooding.

Following on from the review of national flood policy, launched in 2018, the OPW Flood Risk Management Plans (FRMPs) are a roadmap for flood risk management measures that, in conjunction with flood risk schemes already constructed, will provide protection to approximately 95% of properties assessed to be at significant flood risk.

Building on the FRMPs, the OPW has published a Climate Change Sectoral Adaptation Plan for Flood Risk Management 2019 - 2024, in line with the requirements of the *National Adaptation Framework* and the *Climate Action Plan 2019*. The Sectoral Plan approved by Government in October 2019 includes twenty-one actions to meet the objectives of ongoing research and assessment, adapting flood risk management practice across Government to effectively manage the potential impacts of climate change on future flood risk.

In addition, other sectoral adaptation plans include important actions in relation to flooding and flood risk. The Climate Change Sectoral Adaptation Plans for Biodiversity, and for the Built and Archaeological Heritage which are under the remit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage contain actions in relation to adaptation of the built and natural heritage in the context of potential impacts from flooding and flood risk. The Sectoral Adaptation Plans are available at www.gov.ie/en/collection/51df3-sectoral-adaptation-planning/.

The Climate Action Plan 2021 lists the actions needed to deliver on Ireland's climate targets and sets indicative ranges of emissions reductions for each sector of the economy. The Plan will be updated annually, including in 2022, to ensure alignment with legally binding economy-wide carbon budgets and sectoral ceilings.

The OPW is co-ordinating Ireland's whole of Government approach to flood risk management through the Interdepartmental Flood Policy Co-ordination Group, across the following strategic and policy areas:

- **Prevention** - avoiding construction in flood-prone areas.

- **Protection** - taking feasible measures to protect areas against flooding.
- **Preparedness** - planning and responding to reduce the impacts of flood events.

The members of this Interdepartmental Group are proactively progressing a wide range of significant policy initiatives, for example:

- The Department of Social Protection has an important role in assisting households in the immediate aftermath of emergency events through the Humanitarian Assistance Scheme. The purpose of this scheme is to prevent hardship by providing income-tested financial support to people whose homes are damaged from flooding and severe weather events and who are not in a position to meet costs for essential needs, household items and structural repair.

- The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment operates the humanitarian support scheme for small businesses, community, voluntary and sporting bodies provides assistance to those affected by flooding. The scheme provides a one-off emergency humanitarian support contribution (max. €20,000) towards the costs of returning business premises' to their pre-flood condition including the replacement of flooring, fixtures and fittings and damaged stock.

- The Department of Rural and Community Development has developed a draft Framework Proposal for Community Resilience within Major Emergency Management. The draft Framework explores the potential additional support structure that can be built into existing response plans, facilitating greater co-operation and understanding at a local level while providing the potential for extra resources if, and when, required.

- The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is designated as the Lead Government Department with responsibility for severe weather events including flooding. Local Authorities are designated as the lead agency for response to flooding in the Framework for Major Emergency Management.

- The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage published the *Planning System and Flood Risk Management Guidelines for Planning Authorities* in November 2009. The Guidelines provide for the incorporation of flood risk identification, assessment and management into the planning process.

Departmental Data

192. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if her Department has commissioned any polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies within the remit of her Department for the period 1 January 2021 to date; if so, if she will provide details of the policies; the costs incurred for each individual poll; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4052/22]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): My Department utilises a broad range of different types of information to inform policy, including data from the CSO and other public bodies, data collected as part of the implementation of Departmental programmes and data collected by its agencies. This latter category may include data collected through public surveys including, for example, the Arts during Lockdown National Survey, conducted on behalf of the Arts Council and the Irish Sports Monitor, conducted on behalf of Sport Ireland.

Consultation with stakeholders and the public also typically forms part of the Department's policy development process and may take a number of forms depending on the policy and sec-

tor involved. The most recent example of such engagement is the stakeholder engagement forum and online public consultation as part of the development of the pilot basic income scheme for the arts. For the online public consultation, members of the public and organisations were invited to make submissions in response to a published consultation document.

My Department has not, however, commissioned any specific polling of the general public in the period in question.

Proposed Legislation

194. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the way the transfer of the National Symphony Orchestra from RTÉ to the National Concert Hall has taken place prior to the National Concert Hall has taken place prior to the National Cultural Institutions (National Concert Hall) (Amendment) Bill 2022 coming before the Houses of the Oireachtas; and the reason the Bill remains necessary given that the transfer is complete. [4217/22]

195. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she has brought the national cultural institutions (national concert hall) (amendment) Bill to Government yet given her stated expectation that she would do so in September 2021. [4218/22]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 194 and 195 together.

On 19 January 2022, the Government agreed to the operational transfer of the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra (NSO) and Choirs from RTÉ to the National Concert Hall (NCH) with effect from 24 January 2022. At this meeting, the Government also agreed the General Scheme of the National Cultural Institutions (National Concert Hall) Amendment Bill 2022 providing for an amendment to the National Cultural Institutions (National Concert Hall) Act 2015, and providing for an Amendment to the Broadcasting Act 2009.

The existing provisions of the National Concert Hall Act 2015 are considered broad enough to include the transfer of the NSO as part of the NCH's brief to promote and support the performance of music supported by the express power to enter into arrangements for this purpose. It was on this basis that the transfer was agreed by Government, in advance of amending the NCH Act.

The Government considers it desirable to amend the Act of 2015 and the Broadcasting Act 2009 to expressly give the NCH the power to own and maintain an orchestra. In this regard the General Scheme of the National Cultural Institutions (National Concert Hall) Amendment Bill 2022 will shortly be submitted to the Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media for pre-legislative scrutiny.

The decision to transfer the NSO at this time will have a positive impact on the operation of the orchestra including in relation to recruitment. At present, the playing complement is below that required to perform the full repertoire of classical programming, leading to a reliance on casual performers supplementing the members of the orchestra for many performances. This lent urgency to the task of enabling the NCH to commence the process of restoring the orchestra to full strength and their being empowered to deliver on the artistic vision outlined in the Boaden report.

Question No. 195 answered with Question No. 194.

Departmental Expenditure

196. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the way the €8 million allocated to the National Concert Hall to cover the costs of the National Symphony Orchestra in 2021 was spent given that the transfer of the National Symphony Orchestra from RTÉ to the National Concert Hall did not take place until 2022; and if a corresponding reduction in funding to RTÉ of €8 million was considered as part of budget preparations for that year. [4219/22]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): On Wednesday 19th January 2022, the Government agreed to the transfer of the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra and Choirs from RTÉ to the National Concert Hall with effect from 24 January 2022

It had originally been intended that the transfer would take place in 2021 and an amount of €8m was included in my Department's budget for this purpose. For various reasons it was not possible to complete the transfer during 2021 and the majority of funding was applied to other expenditure needs within my Department's Vote in accordance with public financial procedures.

RTÉ is funded through a mix of public funding and commercial revenues. The public funding element is derived from the receipts in respect of television licence fees each year, and is provided for under Section 123 of the Broadcasting Act, 2009. The Broadcasting Act 2009 also sets out the public service objects and powers of RTÉ, including, under Section 98, its independence in the performance of their public service remit. Therefore I have no function in relation to operational activities, including the annual budgeting process.

Vacant Properties

197. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the reason that Dublin City Council cannot CPO a pub (details supplied) which has been lying idle in the heart of Finglas village for a decade, is on the derelict site register and the owner has not paid any of the €28,000 levy owed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4033/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): The Derelict Sites Act 1990 imposes a general duty on every owner and occupier of land to take all reasonable steps to ensure that the land does not become, or continue to be, a derelict site. The Act also imposes a duty on local authorities to take all reasonable steps, including the exercise of appropriate statutory powers, to ensure that any land within their functional area does not become, or continue to be, a derelict site. Local authority powers include requiring owners or occupiers to take appropriate measures on derelict sites; acquiring derelict sites by agreement, or compulsorily; and applying a derelict sites levy on derelict sites.

It is a matter for local authorities to determine the most appropriate use of the legislation within their respective functional areas.

National Parks

198. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the OPW has plans to carry out works on the pathway and roadway from the boat-house in the Killarney National Park to Torc Waterfall (details supplied); and if he will make a

statement on the matter. [4148/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): The National Parks and Wildlife Service of my Department has undertaken a comprehensive road repair programme in Killarney National Park over the winter months. The section of roadway in question was included in this programme of works and is now completely resurfaced and finished to a very high standard. This area is well serviced by an adequate footpath and trail network, which joins the main car park to Torc. Accordingly, it should not be necessary for visitors to park to walk on or share the roadway with the horse drawn carriages.

Housing Provision

199. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of a development (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4016/22]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) are making an important contribution to social housing delivery, as envisaged under the Housing for All Plan. The Government is committed to increasing social housing delivery and plans to deliver more than 90,000 social homes to 2030.

My Department operates a number of funding programmes that assist local authorities to work in partnership with AHBs to construct, purchase and lease new homes and make them available for social housing. One such programme that provides finance to assist AHBs progress construction projects is the Capital Advance Loan Facility (CALF).

CALF funding is capital support provided to Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) by local authorities to facilitate the funding of construction, acquisition or refurbishment of new social housing units. This loan facility can support up to 30% of the eligible capital cost of the housing project, with the housing units provided to local authorities for social housing use under long-term lease arrangements known as Payment and Availability Agreements. A nominal interest rate of 2% fixed per annum is charged by the local authority on the initial capital amount. Repayments on either the capital or interest are not required during the term of the loan (between 10 and 30 years), although where an AHB chooses to, repayments can be made during the term. At the end of the term, the outstanding capital amount plus the interest accrued, is owed and repayable to the local authority. The local authority issues the CALF monies to the AHB and the local authority, in turn, recoups same from the Department.

With regard to the specific project mentioned by the Deputy, I can confirm that the project received conditional CALF funding approval in 2019 for 34 social housing homes. The most recent update from Co-Operative Housing Ireland is that they are currently working to progress the project to Tender stage, with expected final delivery in 2023. This project is being progressed with the support of the local authority.

My Department publishes a quarterly Social Housing Construction Projects Status Report, which sets out the continuing progress being made in advancing the national local authority and AHB new-build pipeline. The latest report, setting out the position at end Q3 2021, can be accessed at the following weblink:

www.gov.ie/en/collection/cb885-social-housing-construction-projects-status-reports/.

Housing Provision

200. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the proposed public housing development at Shanganagh Castle, Shankill, County Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4017/22]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): In July 2020 approval was granted by Cabinet to allow the Land Development Agency (LDA) and Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council (DLR) to proceed to tender for the construction of 597 units at Shanganagh Castle.

This flagship LDA project will deliver 597 homes on public land, combining social, cost rental and affordable homes in the first such development in the State. This important project is intended to act as a pathfinder for other mixed tenure schemes which are key to delivering public housing on public land.

This project will see the construction of 200 social housing units which will be funded through social housing capital funding. The remaining costs associated with the cost rental and affordable purchase homes will be met by Affordable Housing Fund.

The tender process is on-going and my Department are currently carrying out a preliminary review of the draft Final Business Case. Following tender reports and selection of the preferred bidder, planned for the end of March 2022, the LDA and DLR will submit the updated Final Business Case to my Department for review and approval. Following cabinet approval to proceed, construction is expected to commence in Q3 2022.

Departmental Data

201. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his Department has commissioned any polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies within the remit of his Department for the period 1 January 2021 to date; if so, if he will provide details of the policies; the costs incurred for each individual poll; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4047/22]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department has not commissioned any polling since 1 January 2021.

An online survey in relation to defects in housing on behalf of the working group established by me to examine defects in housing is being prepared by my Department with the support of the Housing Agency. It is intended to go live at the end of the month. The survey audience is homeowners and landlords of apartments and duplexes built between 1991-2013 and Owners' Management Companies and Property Management Agents responsible for or managing such buildings. There are no external costs associated with this survey.

Housing Provision

202. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the average wait time for a one, two, three and four-bedroom council home in County Carlow over the past 12 months; and the average wait time for a disability adapted housing unit in County Carlow over the past 12 months. [4085/22]

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

Detail on the number of households qualified for social housing support in each local authority administrative area is provided in the annual statutory Summary of Social Housing Assessments (SSHA). The SSHA captures the total number of households qualified for social housing support across the country whose social housing need has not yet been met and helps better inform policy and planning for the delivery of the right types of social housing support.

The most recently published summary, conducted in November 2020, can be accessed at the link below. It includes a breakdown by local authority across a range of categories, including household size and the length of time spent on the record of qualified households (waiting lists).

My Department does not hold information on the average wait time for one, two, three and four-bedroom homes, or for disability adapted housing.

The 2021 SSHA process is underway and I expect to publish the summary report before end Q1, 2022.

Report 2020 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 Provision

203. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the bedroom entitlements of persons with children of two genders and those with children of the same gender. [4095/22]

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

Applications for social housing support are assessed by the relevant local authority, 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).

In line with the Regulations, applicant households are assessed for eligibility in the first instance. Then, if deemed eligible, their housing need and accommodation requirements are assessed.

Regulation 23 of the Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011 sets out the aspects of a household's current accommodation to which the authority shall have regard when determining a household's need for social housing support. Regulation 24 sets out considerations relating to provision of social housing support, including the number of persons in the household, the age and gender of household members, and their inter-relationships.

Decisions on the qualification of households for social housing support, the most appropriate form of such support, and the allocation of that support are a matter solely for the local authority concerned.

Defective Building Materials

204. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 583, 584 and 585 of 19 January 2022, if he will provide a breakdown of the administrative cost headings for both local authorities; and if he

will make a statement on the matter. [4107/22]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Donegal and Mayo County Council have responsibility for the administration of the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant scheme. This includes the assessment of applications for eligibility and payment of grants to successful applicants under the specific remediation option approved.

Budget 2021 provided funding of €20 million to fund the operation of the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant scheme for the counties of Donegal and Mayo only. Details of the administrative costs of implementing the scheme in 2021 are outlined below.

Donegal	-
Salaries	€336,138.42
Computer Software Development, Equipment and Licensing	€25,764.66
Office Furniture/Equipment/Stationery/Communications	€305.84
Training	€465.00
Travel Expenses	€1,201.25
Total	€363,875.17

Mayo	-
Salaries	€49,388.69
Architects Fees	€82,784.50
Engineers Fees (review of files)	€33,531.30
QS Fees	€13,569.85
Appeals Costs	€14,760.00
Computer Software Development	€5,535.00
Petrographic Assessments	€799.50
Total	€200,368.84

Housing Schemes

205. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will report on the detailed eligibility criteria for fresh start applicants under the local authority home loan scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4131/22]

206. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if persons who had to sell their home resulting in a mortgage in negative equity will qualify as a fresh start applicant under the local authority home loan scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4132/22]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 205 and 206 together.

The Local Authority Home Loan is a Government backed mortgage scheme for those on modest or low incomes who cannot get sufficient funding from commercial banks to purchase or build a home. It has been available nationwide from local authorities since 4 January 2022 for first-time buyers and fresh start applicants. The loan can be used both for new and second-hand properties, or to self-build. A 'Fresh Start' principle applies for applications to State loan schemes such the Local Authority Home Loan. The following categories of persons are eligible to apply for the Local Authority Home Loan under the Fresh Start principle:

- Applicant(s) that previously purchased or built a residential property, but is divorced and has left the property and divested themselves of their interest in the property are eligible.

- Applicant(s) that previously purchased a residential property, but have been divested of this through insolvency or bankruptcy proceedings, are eligible to apply. The applicant must be discharged from bankruptcy proceedings. It should be noted that a return to solvency should not be interpreted as a return to creditworthiness, which is a separate assessment.

In recognition of such instances, an exemption to the First Time Buyer eligibility criteria can be applied under the Fresh Start Principle.

The final decision regarding the Local Authority Home Loan application is made by the relevant Local Authority Credit Committee on a case by case basis.

Further details can be found on localauthorityhomeloan.ie/.

Question No. 206 answered with Question No. 205.

Vacant Sites

207. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the value of vacant site levies collected in County Limerick for the period 2016 to 2021, in tabular form; and the number of vacant sites listed in Limerick city and county. [4152/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): Under the vacant site levy provisions in the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act 2015, planning authorities were empowered to apply a vacant site levy of 3% of the market valuation of relevant properties which were listed on local authority vacant site registers in 2018, which relevant owners were liable to pay in January 2019. The rate of the levy increased to 7% for sites listed on local authority vacant sites registers from 2019 onwards which site owners became liable to pay in January of the following year.

The requested information is provided in the Table below. This is based on returns submitted to my Department further to the issuing of Circular Letter PL 03/2021 on 8 March 2021 requesting the submission of a progress report on the collection of the levy by each local authority.

Vacant site levy payments (in respect of 2018 - 3% rate)

-	Demands Issued		Payments collected		Payments outstanding	
Number of sites liable 2019	Number	Levy due	Number	Levy collected	Number	Levy outstanding
0	0	€0	0	€0.00	0	€0

Vacant site levy payments (in respect of 2019 - 7% rate)

-	Demands Issued		Payments collected		Payments outstanding	
Number of sites liable 2020	Number	Levy due	Number	Levy collected	Number	Levy outstanding
6	6	€516,950	0	€0.00	6	€516,950 4

Vacant site levy payments (in respect of 2020 - 7% rate)

-	Demands Issued		Payments collected		Payments outstanding	
Number of sites liable 2021	Number	Levy due	Number	Levy collected	Number	Levy outstanding
5	5	€481,950	0	€0.00	5	€481,950

Defective Building Materials

208. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if all homeowners who have been accepted on to the defective concrete blocks scheme ahead of the planned enhancements to the scheme will be eligible to receive the enhanced package; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4153/22]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I am supportive of a recommendation of the working group on Defective Concrete Blocks which would allow for enhancements, as announced as part of the Government's decision on the 30th November 2021, to be made available retrospectively to current eligible scheme applicants if applicable.

I aim to bring the required primary legislation to give effect to the enhanced scheme before the Oireachtas as soon as possible with Spring 2022 being the indicative target timeline. Appropriate transitional provisions will be included in the new legislation to provide a mechanism to move applications that are received in the meantime to the revised scheme once it commences.

Construction Industry

209. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of complaints that have been made to the Construction Industry Register in each year since it was established; the actions or sanctions that have resulted on foot of these complaints; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4213/22]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The main objective of the Regulation of Providers of Building Works Bill 2021, is to develop and promote a culture of competence, good practice and compliance with the Building Regulations in the construction sector, which will benefit consumers and the general public. The legislation will require providers of building services to register with the appointed statutory body. This will apply to entities or individuals who hold themselves out for consideration as a provider of building works for both residential and non-residential buildings (subject to the building regulations).

The Bill will allow for complaints against registered builders to be made on a number of grounds – in particular in relation to an entity providing building services in a category in which they are not registered. It provides for a range of proportionate sanctions to be imposed after investigation. Complaints in relation to building regulations will continue to be dealt with under the Building Control Act.

The Bill provides that when the register is operating on a statutory basis, the Admissions and Appeals Board shall publish information in relation to sanctions of registered members as it thinks fit and that the statutory body shall also prepare an annual report of its proceedings

under the Act.

The current Construction Industry Register of Ireland (CIRI) register was established in 2014 by the Construction Industry Federation and approximately 800 building and contracting entities are included on the register. This register is voluntary, and is operating on a non-statutory basis. The number of complaints received and actions taken are a matter for CIRI.

Museum Projects

210. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will consider the proposal to secure the archives, exhibits and artifacts from a museum (details supplied) and to use them for a national famine museum; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4149/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Great Famine was a time which radically altered the course of Irish history and of American history. Many thousands of Irish emigrants fleeing Ireland at that time found refuge and a new home in the United States, and many of these are the ancestors of the 30 million Americans who now claim Irish heritage.

- Ireland's Great Hunger Museum at Quinnipiac University holds an impressive collection of art, artefacts and literature related to the Famine. Showcasing collections such as these is important in ensuring the story of where the Irish came from is not forgotten. The Museum has played an important role in that process.

I am aware of the challenges facing the museum in recent years and believe that, should the museum not reopen in its current location, it would be important that a new home be found for this collection. The aim should be to re-house the collection so that the works it contains remain accessible to the public and researchers alike. I am aware that there is strong preference amongst the Irish American community for it to remain in the United States. Should another museum or institution be identified to host the collection, my Department would be happy to discuss if there are any ways we can offer support. Other Departments may also wish to consider this.

Foreign Conflicts

211. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on whether the continued massing of Russian troops on the border of Ukraine is a cause for real concern (details supplied); if his Department and the Government has a role to play as interlocuter or mediator between Russia and European interests; if Ireland's ambassadorial team has considered adopting such an initiative; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3851/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland has consistently made clear its support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Along with our EU partners, we have consistently called on Russia to de-escalate the tensions caused by its protracted military build-up. The build-up of Russian troops near its border with Ukraine is a significant cause for concern to us.

It is the fundamental and inalienable right of a sovereign and independent state to chart its own path in the world; to choose its own foreign policy and to make arrangements for the security and defence of its territory. Ireland has made its own choice to be a committed member of the EU. Ireland's policy of neutrality remains very clear and accepted by our EU partners. In fact, Ireland is one of five EU Member States that pursue a policy of military neutrality. Just

as we would not accept another state dictating what foreign or defence policy we choose to follow as a nation, Ukraine has the sovereign right to follow its own foreign and defence policy without interference from outside its borders.

I have been closely engaged in this issue at the EU for many months. I and my EU colleagues discussed the situation in Ukraine most recently at the Foreign Affairs Council on Monday of this week (24 January). The EU is united in its support to Ukraine and its commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty. We have sent a clear message to Russia to defuse tension in the context of their activities on the border of Ukraine, and to give reassurance to the rest of the world on its intentions.

As EU Foreign Ministers, we condemned Russia's continued aggressive actions and threats against Ukraine. We have also been clear that, should Russia decide to invade Ukraine militarily, there would be severe consequences for such action from an EU perspective, in terms of sanctions and restrictions. These would follow quickly and would have a sustained and significant effect.

Passport Services

212. Deputy Danny Healy-Rae asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if additional staff will be recruited to the passport office given the lengthy delays incurred processing passport applications (details supplied). [4165/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Adequate staffing of the Passport Service to respond to demand is a priority for my Department and is an issue that is kept under constant review.

My Department is actively working with the Public Appointments Service on an ongoing basis to recruit and assign additional staff at all grades to meet the current and forecasted high demand for passports in 2022.

Additional permanent and temporary officers are continuously being assigned to the Passport Service at its sites in Dublin and Cork. I expect that by the end of this month, staffing numbers will be at approximately 775. This is a 70% increase on June of last year. Significant numbers of staff will continue to be assigned to the Passport Service throughout February and into March.

The Irish Passport was recently ranked 5th in the Henley Global Passport Index as it provides our citizens with visa free access to 187 countries. In order to protect the integrity and security of the Irish passport, Passport Service staff continued to work on-site over the past challenging two years to deliver this essential service to our citizens. Despite pandemic-related disruptions, the Passport Service issued over 634,000 passports in 2021.

I am confident that the additional staff that have been assigned and will continue to be recruited over the coming weeks will have a positive impact on processing times, particularly for first time passport applications.

I am aware that there is pent-up demand for passports due to the challenges with international travel over the past two years. I urge citizens to check the validity of their passports before booking travel and to ensure that they apply online in plenty of time. The processing of an online application is consistently up to four times faster than the processing time of a paper application.

Foreign Conflicts

213. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent of discussions he has had with European Union colleagues or otherwise through the United Nations with a view to humanitarian intervention in conflict zones globally with particular reference to the need to offer some protection to women and children in areas such as Belarus and Sudan. [57675/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): Ireland consistently engages at EU and UN level on the issue of humanitarian support and the protection of women and children in conflict. Ireland also works closely with UN agencies, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs to save lives and deliver essential assistance in conflict zones.

Ireland is a global champion of Women, Peace and Security and on the Security Council, we have repeatedly drawn attention to the need to protect women and ensure their full, equal and meaningful participation in peace negotiations in countries around the world. As a committed signatory to the Call for Action on the Protection of Women from Gender Based Violence (GBV) in Conflict, Ireland is a leading voice in ensuring that every humanitarian response from the outset includes the policies, systems and mechanisms necessary to prevent and mitigate GBV. Furthermore, through a Strategic Partnership with the International Rescue Committee, Ireland funds life-saving services for women and girl survivors of GBV in five of the most protracted, underfunded humanitarian settings in Africa – South Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya and Burundi.

Ireland is also actively engaged in the work of the Security Council's Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, and its efforts to protect children in situations of conflict. President Higgins delivered Ireland's national statement in the annual Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict on 28 June, 2021.

In relation to Sudan, at the UN Security Council, Ireland has ensured that protection of civilians and, in particular, women and children, is prioritised both in sanctions discussions, and in the UNITAMS and UNISFA peacekeeping mission mandate renewals. Ireland has also ensured that the voices of Sudan's leading women's rights activists are heard in these discussions. Ireland used its platform as president of the Council in September 2021 to call for all UN Member States to enable women and youth to play an active part in the implementation of peace agreements to ensure durability of peace in Sudan and other conflict-affected countries throughout the world. In fact, during Ireland's Presidency of the Council in September, sixteen of seventeen civil society briefers were women, a new record for women's participation at the Council. Ireland also supports the work of Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA), a coalition of women's rights activists working to advance the rights of, and address violence against, women and girls in the Horn of Africa.

In relation to Belarus, in 2021, Ireland allocated €100,000 to the IFRC to support the Lithuania Red Cross' response to the migrant crisis on the Lithuania-Belarus border. In addition, the IFRC launched an operation through their Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) to assist refugees in Lithuania. Ireland is a regular contributor to the DREF and contributed €1 million to this fund in 2021. IFRC has been supporting extremely vulnerable people at the border, including women, persons with disabilities and children – many of them without a parent or guardian. In October 2021, my colleague Minister of State Byrne visited the Lithuanian-Belarusian border, accompanied by members of the Lithuanian Government. In November 2021, Ireland requested, along with EU member states France and Estonia, that the UNSC hold an AOB discussion on Belarus, focused on the ongoing migration issue. Ireland expressed concern about

the deteriorating situation at the EU-Belarus border and highlighted the need to prevent a humanitarian crisis unfolding. Ireland also co-sponsored the recent package of sanctions against the Lukashenko regime.

Brexit Issues

214. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the outcome of talks with persons he and his Department have had in regard to the Northern Ireland Protocol and Brexit. [58659/21]

236. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which discussions between the European Union and UK authorities in relation to Brexit continue to be made with a view to ensuring the maximisation of the interests of the island of Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4186/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 214 and 236 together.

I had a video call with Foreign Secretary Truss on 13 October on a range of issues including Brexit and the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. Following her taking responsibility for Brexit policy issues in December 2021, we spoke by phone on 21 December, and met in person in London on 6 January.

During these engagements, I emphasised that Ireland and the EU remain fully committed to providing certainty and stability for people and business in Northern Ireland. I noted that the Protocol is the joint EU–UK solution to mitigate against the disruption Brexit causes for citizens and businesses on the island of Ireland and that it can work if we allow it to.

I also speak regularly with Commission Vice-President Maroš Šefcovic. Most recently we met in Brussels on 24 January, shortly after his latest meeting with the UK Foreign Secretary. I reiterated to him Ireland’s strong support for his approach.

I welcome the recommencement of talks on the Protocol with the meetings of Vice-President Šefcovic and Foreign Secretary Truss. The positive tone from Secretary Truss is welcome, as is her stated determination to find a solution. The decision to have a meeting of the Joint Committee next month along with a continuation of intensified technical talks is a positive development. However, following the package of measures put forward by the European Commission, we need to see the UK Government meaningfully demonstrate its willingness to come to a deal on the key issues

On 25 January, Vice-President Šefcovic briefed the General Affairs Council on his recent engagements with the UK. It was clear the solidarity that has been the hallmark of the EU’s approach to Brexit remains strong.

Reaching an agreed approach on the Protocol could help reduce tensions ahead of the Northern Ireland Assembly elections. I will continue to meet with political business and community leaders to listen to their concerns and to raise them with my counterparts across the EU.

The EU has made clear that it is ready to find flexible ways of implementing the Protocol, but it is not going to renegotiate it. Renegotiation is not necessary in order to solve legitimate challenges experienced by people and businesses in Northern Ireland

A positive outcome to discussions on the Protocol would also be an important factor in al-

lowing us to turn a page and open up a new chapter in a forward-looking EU–UK partnership. There are a range of global challenges which will greatly benefit from the EU and UK working together.

Northern Ireland is seeing the benefits of the Protocol – in jobs and investment announcements. Businesses recognise the opportunities presented by the Protocol and the unique position of having free and full access to both the EU single market and the rest of the UK internal market. The Protocol will work if we allow it to with flexibility and pragmatism.

Brexit Issues

215. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of the implementation of the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [60514/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Since its entry into force at the beginning of 2021, the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) has provided a framework for continued trade and cooperation with the UK.

While no agreement could have replaced the seamless relationship with the UK enjoyed prior to Brexit, the TCA provides for tariff- and quota- free goods trade between the EU and the UK as well as preferential arrangements in areas such as transport, energy, fisheries, and policing. The agreement is underpinned by provisions to ensure a continued level playing field for businesses as well as extensive governance structures and processes for resolving any disputes which might arise.

The EU and the UK have been meeting regularly through those governance structures over the past year. A meeting of the EU-UK Partnership Council took place last June, at which the EU was represented by Commission Vice President Maroš Šefcovic and the UK was represented by David Frost. At that meeting, the two sides discussed the implementation of the Agreement, including in the areas of fisheries, work visa fees, law enforcement and judicial cooperation, and the UK's participation in Union programmes.

All of the Specialised Committees, the forums for EU-UK engagement across each of the areas covered by the agreement, have now met at least once and discussions have largely been productive. Ireland has actively contributed to the preparation of the EU side's position for those meetings and we continue to follow very closely, with the European Commission, the overall implementation of the agreement.

Effective implementation of the TCA is a priority for Ireland. Not only does it underpin our trade and business relationship with the UK, but it also provides the framework for cooperation in a wide range of areas of significance to us. It also provides a platform for developing further cooperation into the future.

Reaching an agreed approach on the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland will be an important factor in allowing us all to turn a page and open up a new chapter in a forward-looking EU-UK partnership. There are a range of global challenges which we will all be better equipped to address with the EU and the UK working together.

Irish Communities Abroad

216. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of efforts to

resolve the situation involving a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4021/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): There has been extensive engagement on the referenced case at the most senior political and diplomatic levels. I can assure the Deputy that all possible efforts continue to be made through multiple channels – by myself as Minister and at senior political levels here in Dublin; as well as by our diplomats in Beijing, Shanghai and elsewhere throughout our diplomatic network.

This includes my discussions with the Chinese Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Wang Yi, when I met him in May during my visit to China, as well as my correspondence since then with the Minister reiterating my continuing serious concern about the case. There has also been communication at the Head of Government level by An Taoiseach.

In all cases, our engagement has stressed the urgent importance of the citizen being allowed to return home as soon as possible. In the meantime, the Department of Foreign Affairs has been providing ongoing consular advice, support and assistance to the citizen concerned.

As with all consular cases, it would not be appropriate to discuss the specific details of the case, nor to comment publicly on any matters raised that are related to it.

Departmental Data

217. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his Department has commissioned any polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies within the remit of his Department for the period 1 January 2021 to date; if so, if he will provide details of the policies; the costs incurred for each individual poll; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4044/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): No polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies has been commissioned by my Department for the period 1 January 2021 to date.

Humanitarian Aid

218. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will set out the aid being delivered to the people of Afghanistan who are facing starvation at present; if Ireland has taken a specific initiative in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4083/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): I am extremely concerned by the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, which now has the highest number of people in emergency food insecurity in the world.

Ireland through its Official Development Assistance (ODA) programme, Irish Aid, provided over €5.3 million in humanitarian support for the people of Afghanistan in 2021 - a fivefold increase compared to spending in 2020. This funding was allocated to the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund (AHF), UNICEF, Concern Worldwide and HALO Trust. Our partners in Afghanistan are implementing emergency response programmes to address the urgent needs of the population, including providing food aid, treatment for severe acute malnutrition in children, and other essential services. A donor-pledging conference on Afghanistan is likely to take place in March and Ireland will participate.

Ireland is also contributing to the EU response, which allocated more than €1 billion in funding last year to UN agencies and NGOs working in Afghanistan for humanitarian aid and to support basic needs. The EU also established a humanitarian air bridge that delivered 280 tonnes of lifesaving supplies.

In addition, Ireland contributes to global funds and core funding to key agencies that allocate funding to Afghanistan, including WHO, UNHCR, IFRC, ICRC and the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF). Ireland was the 9th largest donor to the CERF in 2021, providing €11 million. Since August, the CERF has allocated more than €68.6 million to Afghanistan. This year we will renew our multiyear partnership with CERF and increase our annual contribution from €10m to €11.5m, as I announced at the CERF pledging conference in December.

Ireland supports all initiatives to alleviate the suffering of the Afghan people. At the UN Security Council, we actively engaged in negotiations to ensure a clear and robust humanitarian carve out to the sanctions regime against the Taliban to ensure the delivery of essential humanitarian aid to the population. The resolution was adopted in December.

Northern Ireland

219. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the source of the core funding for the operation of the North West Strategic Growth Partnership; the way that it is structured; and the details of the recurring funds. [4104/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The November 2015 *Fresh Start Agreement* reaffirmed a commitment of the Irish Government to support the regional development work of the North West Gateway Initiative involving Donegal County Council and Derry City and Strabane District Council. The Agreement also made a commitment to establish a North West Development Fund and for the Irish Government to provide €2.5 million to the Fund, to be complemented by matching funding from the Northern Ireland Executive. The initial Irish Government contribution of €2.5 million, from the Department of Foreign Affairs, was transferred to Derry City and Strabane District Council in December 2015.

Operated jointly by Donegal County Council and Derry City and Strabane District Council, the Fund is used to support three main pillars in the North West: Regional Economic Growth, Regional Physical Development and Regional Social and Community Well-Being. It is not intended for capital projects; rather it is intended to animate proposals, business cases and processes that are strategically relevant for the overall health and growth of the North West region.

The Fund has been established under the principle of subsidiarity and ‘place-based leadership’, that decisions for the region are best made locally and that spend priorities will be identified and agreed between the two Councils.

In line with a condition of the transfer of Government funding in December 2015, the Fund is subject to full audit and governance arrangements, under a Partnership Agreement between the two regional Councils, who operate the Fund. A Terms of Reference covers all relevant aspects of Fund management, including annual monitoring, expenditure and approval limits, delegated authority and all associated legal, financial and equality implications.

Individual projects are assessed, monitored and managed by officials from Derry City and Strabane District Council and Donegal County Council and progress against key performance indicators is reported to the North West Strategic Growth Partnership, which brings together senior Government officials from relevant Departments North and South, the CEOs of both Councils, and other stakeholders to deliver on the strategic priorities. Officials from the Joint

Secretariat of the North South Ministerial Council also continue to attend meetings of the North West Strategic Growth Partnership.

The North West Development Fund has delivered on a range of initiatives including joint research on the impact of Brexit on the North West region, joint trade missions and greenway projects.

As part of the *New Decade, New Approach* agreement in January 2020 the Irish Government committed to continue its support for the work of the North West Strategic Growth Partnership and in principle to provide further funding to the North West Development Fund in collaboration with the Northern Ireland Executive.

Reflecting this commitment, in October 2021 the Irish Government, through the Department of Foreign Affairs, contributed an additional allocation of €1 million to the North West Development Fund. This allocation is intended to supplement the original allocation of €2.5 million provided by the Irish Government in 2015, to facilitate the extension of the current phase of the Fund in accordance with the established financial management and governance procedures, and to allow the continuation of activities supported by the Fund up to the end of 2022.

Military Exercises

220. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he and or his officials staff met with Russian officials, diplomats or military staff in respect of Russian plans to conduct artillery drills off the coast of this jurisdiction (details supplied); if so, if he will publish minutes and or memos attached to those meetings; and if he will provide the date on which he was informed of Russian plans to conduct these drills. [4135/22]

222. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which concerns are being expressed to the Russian authorities in regard to the use of a sea area close to Irish territorial waters for military manoeuvres; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4172/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 220 and 222 together.

The Government is aware of planned Russian naval exercises taking place off the south west coast of Ireland in early February. The exercises are not taking place within Ireland's territorial waters, but 240 kilometres off the south west coast and within Ireland's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

Under international law, states are entitled to freedom of navigation in another state's EEZ, having due regard to the rights and duties of the coastal state. The Irish Aviation Authority (IAA) was informed of the exercise via standard procedures and issued a statement to that effect.

However, in light of the current political and security environment in Europe, I have raised a number of concerns with the Russian Ambassador to Ireland in respect of these exercises. Officials from my Department, including the Secretary General of the Department of Foreign Affairs, have also held several additional discussions with the Russian Ambassador in this regard.

In the course of these conversations, I have clearly outlined to the Russian Ambassador our concerns in relation to both the timing and the nature of these planned naval exercises. As I have previously stated, we find ourselves at a moment when there is a need for de-escalation, to

lower tensions and to avoid military activity that could be seen as unhelpful.

During the meeting of EU Foreign Ministers in Brussels, our discussions focused on the security situation in Europe, with a focus on Ukraine. During the discussions, I also informed my EU colleagues about the planned Russian naval exercises.

Humanitarian Aid

221. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on the conference in Oslo with Afghan representatives regarding humanitarian relief for the Afghan people; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4139/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Norway, the current chair of the UN Security Council, initiated a set of talks in Oslo from 23 to 25 January, with the stated goal of taking steps towards addressing the humanitarian situation in the country, as well as engaging the Taliban on human rights issues, especially girls' schooling and women's participation in society. The talks comprised three strands, involving representatives of the Taliban, representatives of Afghan civil society, and representatives of the governments of Norway, France, Germany, Italy, the UK, and the US. The EU also took part in some of these talks, represented by its Special Envoy for Afghanistan Tomas Niklasson.

EU Special Envoy Niklasson has already had a number of meetings with Taliban representatives in Doha, in line with the EU's five benchmarks for engagement with the Taliban agreed by Foreign Ministers in September 2021. In his meetings, Special Envoy Niklasson continues to emphasise the need for the Taliban to respect the human rights of all Afghans as well as discussing the humanitarian and 'humanitarian plus' assistance that the EU is providing for Afghanistan through UN agencies, international organisations, and NGOs. In his meeting with the Taliban representatives who travelled to Oslo, he again raised human rights concerns and he reconfirmed that the EU would continue its humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, calling for further meetings moving forward, as well as discussing Taliban engagement with UN-appointed special rapporteurs.

Since the Taliban seizure of power last August, the EU and Member States have allocated more than €1 billion in funding to UN agencies and NGOs working in Afghanistan, for both humanitarian aid and for supporting basic needs ('humanitarian plus'). The EU also established a humanitarian air bridge that in 2021 delivered 280 tonnes of lifesaving medication, food and equipment against COVID-19 to Afghanistan. The EU has re-established a minimal diplomatic presence in Kabul in recent days, in order to better engage with the Taliban-appointed caretaker cabinet on humanitarian and human rights issues.

Question No. 222 answered with Question No. 220.

Foreign Conflicts

223. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which political pressure continues to be applied to the Russian Federation with a view to ensuring that the independence of Ukraine is honoured; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4173/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland is a strong and consistent supporter of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and has condemned Russian viola-

tions of Ukrainian sovereignty. The build-up of Russian troops on the border with Ukraine is a matter of great concern. It is important that dialogue be maintained, with the primary goal of de-escalating tensions in the region. In this regard, I welcome the intensive diplomatic efforts which have occurred in recent weeks, aimed at defusing tensions. These include bilateral discussions between the US and Russia, between NATO and Russia, and at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. As a participating State in the OSCE, Ireland is pleased to express solidarity with Ukraine and seek a peaceful de-escalation of tensions in that forum. Ireland has repeatedly reaffirmed its support for Ukraine at United Nations Security Council meetings on Ukraine, including at Arria formula meetings. We have also stressed our non-recognition of the illegal annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, encouraged full, secure and unimpeded access for the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission, and called for the full implementation of the Minsk Agreements. EU Foreign Ministers discussed the situation in Ukraine at the Foreign Affairs Council on 13 December, in Gymnich formation on 13 and 14 January, and again at the Foreign Affairs Council of 24 January. In my own remarks, I have consistently underlined the need for strong and unified messaging from the EU. In remarks after the December Foreign Affairs Council, High Representative Borrell made clear that aggression against Ukraine, will come with political consequences and with a high economic cost for Russia. This has been re-enforced in Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions on 24 January, which state that preparatory work has accelerated on restrictive measures in case of further military aggression by Russia against Ukraine. The Council Conclusions also condemn Russia's continued aggressive actions and threats against Ukraine, and call on Russia to de-escalate.

I and my counterparts at the Foreign Affairs Council have dedicated significant time to the security situation in Ukraine this year, including through engagements with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba. I also discussed these matters with Minister Kuleba when I travelled to Kyiv on 23 August to represent Ireland at the International Crimea Platform, a diplomatic initiative by Ukraine to seek a peaceful end to the illegal Russian occupation of the peninsula.

Irish Aid

224. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the degree to which bilateral and multilateral aid programmes continue to identify countries suffering from war, starvation or natural disasters with a view to addressing the issues arising therefrom; if particular or specific programmes are being developed to address issues such as medicines and water shortages; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4174/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): My Department, through the Irish Aid programme, prioritises reaching those most in need, those living in countries suffering from the effects of war, starvation, and natural disasters, amongst other issues.

Many of countries where Ireland has bilateral aid programmes are those which have recently emerged from conflict or, in some cases, where armed actions continue. These include Sierra Leone and Liberia, following on from UN peacekeeping operations there, Mozambique, where there has been internal conflict for much of the last decade, and Ethiopia.

Ireland works with a wide range of partners including the UN, Development Banks, and NGOs, as well as in our capacity as an EU Member State, to ensure that our assistance reaches those most in need.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UN OCHA) provides vital needs assessments which ensure Irish Aid is targeted at the most compelling humanitarian

crises. Last year, my Department provided over €5 million in direct support to each of the following countries – Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen. This is in addition to our contributions to UN humanitarian organisations, the Red Cross family, and the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), which also provided support to these protracted crises.

Over the past two years, my Department has invested €200 million in global public health, much of which reaches countries experiencing humanitarian emergencies. In addition to my Department's partnership with the HSE in our bilateral partners to help build more resilient national health systems, Ireland is a longstanding core supporter of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (Global Fund), which supports eligible countries with essential treatments and medical supplies. Ireland is currently a Board member at the Global Fund, championing their work in fragile contexts.

The total Irish Aid contribution to date to COVAX is €13.5 million. Through our complementary support to the Global Vaccine Alliance (Gavi), which co-leads COVAX, Irish Aid is directly contributing to immunising refugees and internally displaced populations in the world's poorest countries.

Irish Aid supports efforts to improve global governance of water and sanitation, especially in countries affected by humanitarian crises. For example in Gaza, Ireland is partnering with the French Development Agency to provide sustainable solar power to the North Gaza Emergency Sewage Treatment plant to ensure adequate clean water. In Mozambique, Ireland works with local government representatives to build new water systems, install water access points and rehabilitate existing boreholes. In Liberia, Ireland is supporting the multi-NGO WASH consortium to deliver water and sanitation to rural communities. Irish core support for UNICEF contributes to improved water supplies and sanitation facilities in schools and communities, and safe hygiene practices in 90 countries.

Foreign Policy

225. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which directly and or through the European Union or United Nations and using Ireland's position on the United Nations Security Council efforts continue to be made to address situations in which hunger, starvation, genocide, ethnic cleansing and violence against minorities can be addressed in a meaningful way; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4175/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): The Global Island review of our foreign policy engagement published in 2015 sets out our ambition for a fairer, more just, more secure and more sustainable world through our development programme, human rights policies, peacekeeping, disarmament and security policies and growing engagement with emerging global issues including climate change. It also considers the role of the EU and UN in amplifying Ireland's voice and extending its influence. That vision was amplified in 2019 with the publication of A Better World, the Government's policy on international development, and the Global Ireland policy, enhances our ability to advocate for and achieve our foreign policy objectives, including international development, peace, disarmament and security.

During this second part of Ireland's tenure on the Security Council, our engagement will continue to be guided by the principles that the Government agreed at the start of our term: building peace, strengthening conflict prevention, and ensuring accountability.

Accountability for human rights violations, including genocide and ethnic cleansing, re-

mains a key priority. Ireland has been active in the Security Council and other international fora on these matters, both independently and as part of the EU. For example, at both Human Rights Councils 43 and 44, Ireland joined other EU Member States in co-sponsoring resolutions on protecting populations from genocide.

A strong international criminal justice system is also central to fighting impunity. While states bear the primary responsibility to investigate the most serious international crimes, including war crimes and genocide, Ireland regards the International Criminal Court as the cornerstone of such a system. We are a consistent and strong supporter of the Court.

Ireland is the informal focal point on hunger and conflict on the Security Council, reflecting the importance which addressing hunger has in our development programme.

In December's Nutrition for Growth Summit, hosted by Japan, Ireland pledged to spend €800 million over the next five years on nutrition programmes and interventions. These pledges show Ireland's commitment to place nutrition at the forefront of development priorities and as a critical element in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

Ireland's strong relationship with the World Food Programme, the largest humanitarian agency fighting hunger worldwide, is a key part of our work to address famine. Under a new agreement signed in December 2021, Ireland will provide at least €75 million to WFP over the next three years (2022 – 2024).

Human Rights

226. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the top ten locations worldwide identified by the United Nations as being volatile in terms of human rights; if sufficient efforts are being made to address these issues with the international community; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4176/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The human rights situation in any particular country is unique in its character, scale and complexity, and a universally agreed global ranking does not exist.

On the 18th November 2021, I set out the overall response by Ireland and the international community to ongoing human rights crises in my response to the Deputy's Parliamentary Questions (204, 205, 210, 212, 213, 214).

Both at this session, and all PQ sessions, I will be very pleased to provide further detail where requested in relation to individual countries of specific concern.

Foreign Policy

227. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which efforts continue to be made to foster and encourage stability and European Union membership in the western Balkans; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4177/22]

237. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the degree to which efforts continue to be made to ensure continued peace and stability in the western Balkans; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4187/22]

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

227 and 237 together.

Ireland has always been, and will remain, a strong supporter of enlargement of the European Union, provided that candidate countries meet the necessary conditions for membership. We recognise the value of enlargement as a transformative driver for stability and peace in candidate countries and are concerned at both the increasing disillusionment with the enlargement process in the Western Balkans and the resultant decline in public perception of the EU in the region.

For this reason, it was welcome that the Declaration adopted at the EU-Western Balkans Summit last October contained a clear signal of the continuing priority afforded by the EU to the Enlargement dossier and to achieving early progress in advancing the accession process.

There are five recognised candidates for membership of the European Union: Turkey, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania, and Serbia. Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina are recognised as potential candidates by the EU. Bosnia and Herzegovina has formally submitted an application for membership, while Kosovo has a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union.

The European Commission presented Member States with the main findings and recommendations of the seven country reports on 19 October in last year's 'Enlargement Package'. This was followed up with the agreement of Council Conclusions on the Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process in December. While situations vary from country to country, limited progress in the enlargement process overall was noted due to both the impact of the pandemic and ongoing delays and blockages in the enlargement process.

While technically remaining the two front-runners in terms of EU accession, there is general agreement within both Council and Commission that both Serbia and Montenegro need to increase the dynamism in their reform agenda. Serbia needs to accelerate its reforms regarding fundamental rights and the rule of law, and make significant progress in the normalisation of relations with Kosovo. A recent positive development has been the holding of a referendum on 16 January which saw a number of amendments to the Serbian constitution relating to the judiciary system approved. In Montenegro, more intensive efforts in relation to freedom of expression, media freedom and the fight against corruption and organised crime are required. We have called for intensified dialogue among all parties in Montenegro to address those issues currently giving rise to tensions within the country.

Both North Macedonia and Albania have clearly fulfilled the conditions necessary to commence accession negotiations. In our view, shared almost unanimously within the Council, the negotiating frameworks for both countries should be agreed and Intergovernmental Conferences held as soon as possible to start the accession process. We continue to advocate for this at EU meetings and working groups.

Kosovo is a potential candidate for membership of the EU. The Commission's report on Kosovo in 2021 noted that the political situation there remains challenging. Rule of law, judicial reform, public administration reform, organised crime and normalisation of the relationship with Serbia are just some of the areas that must be comprehensively addressed in order for Kosovo to advance on its European path.

The EU has clearly set out the fourteen priority areas for reform which need to be progressed, if Bosnia and Herzegovina is to advance on its European path. We call on all parties and leaders within Bosnia and Herzegovina to avoid further delay in progressing this urgent reform agenda, including in the areas of electoral and constitutional law.

Ireland will continue to support strongly the enlargement process and offer any practical assistance it can to candidate countries engaged in accession negotiations to the EU. It is our firm belief that it is through EU membership that peace and security can best be ensured throughout the Western Balkans.

Foreign Conflicts

228. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which the international community continues to monitor the activities of the Boko Haram and Al Shabaab or associated organisations with a view to minimising and eliminating their ability to carry out attacks on women, young girls or children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4178/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): I strongly condemn the continued violence perpetrated by Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab, support work of the EU and UN to reduce their influence, and to prevent their attacks, especially against civilians and humanitarian workers and facilities.

Through Irish Aid, the Government's official aid programme, my Department is tackling poverty, hunger and exclusion, which can be drivers of support for groups such as Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab, as well as responding to humanitarian need in regions affected by conflict. As a Member State, Ireland contributes to the significant European Union development and humanitarian response in Somalia, and in countries affected by Boko Haram.

Since 2015, Irish Aid has contributed €34 million in humanitarian funding to alleviate the conditions of people in distress across the Lake Chad region. This includes funding to Concern Worldwide, Goal, and Plan International Ireland, as well as to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Through the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) and the UN Peacebuilding Commission, the United Nations is helping stabilise the situation in the Lake Chad region. Ireland is penholder, together with Niger, on the UNOWAS file at the UN Security Council. In its Presidential Statement on peace consolidation in West Africa of 17 August 2021, the Security Council strongly condemned continued attacks against civilians in the region, and both attacks and threats of attacks against schools, children, and educational personnel, including recent abductions in Nigeria.

Irish Aid provides funding to support those displaced by conflict in North-East Nigeria, where the numbers of people in need of humanitarian assistance and protection are at the highest levels recorded.

Additionally, Ireland is a member of the International Support Group of the Regional Stabilisation Strategy for the Lake Chad Basin (ISG), and has observer status at the Sahel Alliance: both are forums which enable donors to coordinate support in addressing the challenges in Boko Haram-affected areas of the Lake Chad Basin.

Since 2012, Ireland has provided over €57 million in humanitarian assistance to Somalia, including to communities displaced by conflict in Al Shabaab-held areas. With humanitarian needs in these regions likely to remain acute, Irish funding will continue to target those most in need. The UN-mandated African Union-led peacekeeping mission in Somalia (AMISOM) supports the Federal Government of Somalia in its efforts to combat Al-Shabaab. Ireland is Chair of the Somalia Sanctions Committee at the UN Security Council. That Committee oversees an arms embargo and other tools to encourage a more peaceful and secure Somalia, including en-

agement with Al Shabaab. This complements Ireland's role as an EU Member State supporting Somalia, including the strengthening of its government institutions.

The EU has three Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) Missions in the Horn of Africa. A number of Irish nationals are deployed to the civilian mission EUCAP Somalia, including the current Head of Mission. In the Sahel, Ireland currently has 20 Defence Forces personnel participating in EUTM Mali. Ireland also deploys one expert to the civilian mission EUCAP Sahel Niger. 14 Defence Forces personnel are deployed in the United Nations Multi-dimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Ireland's participation in these missions allows us to contribute to peace and security, help protect human rights, and put in place conditions for sustainable development.

Foreign Policy

229. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the efforts being made at international level to address the issue of a person (details supplied); if efforts can or will be made by the international community to challenge their imprisonment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4179/22]

230. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps that are being taken by the international community to show solidarity with a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4180/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 229 and 230 together.

As we approach the one year anniversary of the military coup, Ireland is increasingly concerned by the deteriorating security, human rights, and humanitarian situation in Myanmar. The coup is a reversal of the progress made towards democracy in Myanmar that has taken years to establish.

On 6 December 2021 State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi was sentenced by a military court; an additional sentence was imposed on 10 January 2022. It is possible that there will be further sentences in the coming period in line with the charges put forward by the military regime. Ireland has joined statements by the European Union and the United Nations Security Council expressing deep concern at the sentencing of Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and others. The court proceedings appear to be an attempt to exclude Aung San Suu Kyi and democratically elected leaders from future political engagement and the inclusive dialogue process called for by ASEAN. Ireland condemns these politically motivated verdicts and believes they represent another step towards the dismantling of the rule of law and a violation of human rights in Myanmar.

Ireland is actively engaged on the crisis in Myanmar in the context of our role on the United Nations Security Council and through the EU. The situation in Myanmar has been considered seven times by the Security Council since the coup, most recently on 8 November 2021. The Council has condemned the use of violence by the military, and called for the release of all those detained. The united voice of the Security Council on the situation in Myanmar is welcome, sending a clear message to the Myanmar military.

Ireland has also voiced its concern at four sessions of the Human Rights Council since February 2021 and has consistently supported international efforts towards ensuring accountability and justice, including through the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court.

Ireland supports the EU's adoption of the sanctions against the perpetrators of the coup and the economic entities that sustain them and endorses the strong and comprehensive approach set out in the Council Conclusions adopted by the EU Foreign Affairs Council on February 22 2021. We will continue to work with partners to consider further actions to restore the democratic path in Myanmar.

Question No. 230 answered with Question No. 229.

Foreign Conflicts

231. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which the international community continues to investigate the use of child soldiers in various conflict zones globally; the actions proposed or taken against the perpetrators; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4181/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The recruitment of child soldiers remains a serious problem with tens of thousands of children recruited into conflicts around the world.

The UN Secretary-General issues an 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 his latest 2021 report, the Secretary-General confirmed twenty-one countries where more than 26,000 grave violations against children were verified. The highest number of these violations concerned the recruitment and use of children as child soldiers. The Secretary-General also pointed to the COVID-19 pandemic as an aggravating factor in the recruitment and use of children as child soldiers since 2020, particularly where their access to education and other key social services has been severely hampered, exposing them to even greater risk of recruitment.

Ireland's membership of the Security Council offers us an opportunity to play an active role in combating violations against children in conflict situations. The Security Council has established tools to strengthen child protection and to support international standards on CAAC including a comprehensive monitoring and reporting mechanism. Ireland is an active member of the UN Security Council Working Group on CAAC which adopts conclusions on country situations of concern and ensures follow up of the recommendations at country level.

Ireland is also an active member of the Group of Friends of CAAC as well as the Group of Friends of the Reintegration of Child Soldiers. Ireland continues to combat the use of child soldiers through our development programme, with a focus on addressing the socio-economic causes that contribute to this situation, through providing access to education, skills and livelihood opportunities. Ireland is also a signatory to the Safe Schools Declaration which outlines a set of commitments designed to strengthen the protection of education from attack, restrict the use of schools and universities for military purposes and ensure the continuity of education in armed conflict zones.

Human Rights

232. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if international human rights organisations can continue to be coordinated to deal with human rights abuses on a worldwide scale; the extent to which this is happening at present; and if he will make a state-

ment on the matter. [4182/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The promotion and protection of human rights is a key foreign policy priority for Ireland and consequently Ireland is a strong contributor to strengthening efforts by the United Nations, Council of Europe, and European Union to eliminate human rights violations.

In this regard, international human rights organisations play a critical role in identifying, monitoring, and responding to violations of human rights across the globe. Against the backdrop of increasing restrictions, it is essential that human rights organisations can continue to play an unhindered role in protecting human rights at all levels.

Ireland is therefore a strong supporter of international human rights organisations, both in terms of our funding, including in response to conflict and other humanitarian catastrophes, and in terms of our coordination and engagement with them in key fora such as at the Human Rights Council and during our term on the UN Security Council.

At the Human Rights Council, Ireland in coordination with international human rights organisations and a cross regional group of Member States, leads on a resolution most recently renewed in July 2021 to ensure the continued protection of civil society space as a human rights concern. In September 2021, as part of a small core group, Ireland led a successful resolution condemning acts of intimidation or reprisals against Human Rights Defenders engaging with the United Nations.

Ireland remains fully committed to supporting the participation and coordination of international human rights organisations with the Human Rights Council, Special Procedures, Treaty Bodies, and as key interlocutors with the Universal Periodic Review process, and indeed as key partners with the European Union and in other relevant fora.

Irish Aid

233. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which Ireland's overseas development aid programme continues to identify the most suitable and deserving recipients for aid; the extent of such aid in the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4183/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): A Better World, Ireland's international development policy, identifies reaching the furthest behind first as a key objective, mandating the Irish Aid programme to work with countries and people in greatest need. Half of Ireland's bilateral development assistance is specifically targeted at assisting low income and least developed countries, double the OECD average: additionally, Irish Aid's humanitarian response places a strong emphasis on fragile context and addressing so-called 'forgotten crises'.

Ireland's commitment to, and ability to deliver on, a needs-based allocation of development assistance is internationally recognised. In 2020, the OECD assessed the Irish Aid programme, finding Ireland to be "an excellent humanitarian partner", with the Irish Aid funding model a "useful inspiration for other DAC donors". It was this emphasis on those most in need which the respected international think-tank ODI assessed last year, finding Ireland to be the most principled donor.

The allocation to development aid has increased year on year for the past eight years, with the 2022 allocation to exceed €1 billion for the first time. The table below sets out the alloca-

tions to official development aid for the five years 2017-21.

Detailed information about the recipient partners and countries of Ireland's development cooperation can be found in the Irish Aid Annual Reports for the years 2017- 2020, available on the Irish Aid website. The 2021 Annual Report will be published later this year.

Total ODA 2017-2020

Year	ODA €M
2017	743.42
2018	791.63
2019	869.54
2020	867.53
2021*	868.00

* This is 2021 ODA allocation. Final 2021 out turn is calculated in arrears and will be published in the 2021 Annual Report

Irish Aid

234. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number and location of projects currently assisted by Ireland's programme at present; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4184/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): In line with our Policy for International Development: *A Better World*, and international best practice, Ireland delivers its Official Development Assistance (ODA) programme through a range of different channels. These channels include funding through Multilateral Organisations, Non-Government Organisations and government systems in partner countries amongst others. Approximately 60 percent of Ireland's total ODA is administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs with the balance administered through other Departments.

My Department works closely with selected partners to ensure lasting improvements in the lives of communities living in poverty and supporting the delivery of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Each year Ireland bilaterally supports partners to undertake approximately 900 project-type interventions across more than 80 countries. Funding to our partners range from core contributions through to specific-purpose programmes that address humanitarian and development needs. This international work is supplemented by our development education engagement that takes place here in Ireland. Annually, approximately fifty Development Education projects are supported. These range in size and scale and target primary, secondary and third level students and well as the general public.

My Department publishes a report on Ireland's ODA programme, known as Irish Aid, each year. The report includes statistical information on programme expenditure in a series of annexes which clearly show the distribution of aid, the amounts allocated to our priority focus areas and amounts given through the various channels and countries. The annual report serves as a core accountability and transparency tool, providing a comprehensive overview of expenditure under the aid programme, and demonstrating the results that have been achieved. Annual Reports for 2020 and previous years are available on the Irish Aid website. The report on 2021 will be available later this year.

Diplomatic Representation

235. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which the Irish embassy and consular network continues to be proactive in pursuing Ireland's interest in the export marketplace; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4185/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The mission network of the Department of Foreign Affairs plays a vital role in increasing trade, diversifying our markets and supporting Irish companies to take advantage of new market opportunities, which is particularly relevant as we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Mission network plays a key role in the Team Ireland approach, which sees Government Departments and State Agencies working closely with other Irish stakeholders to strengthen our international reputation and drive the development of trade, tourism, investment, science, technology and innovation, culture and education. Embassies and Consulates General provide support for Ireland's State Agencies by supporting their strategic objectives and activities in overseas markets. The role of the Mission network in promoting Ireland as a location to do business, invest, study and visit, is particularly pertinent in markets with limited or no State Agency presence. In June 2018, the Government launched the Global Ireland initiative, which aims to double the impact and scope of Ireland's global footprint by 2025. Global Ireland's targets include enhanced global engagement, the expansion of Ireland's Embassy network, and the strengthening of Ireland's State Agency presence overseas. Each of these measures will increase Ireland's international visibility, facilitate market diversification and intensification, and deepen bilateral relations in support of the Government's economic and political objectives. This programme is now past the half way mark, with 14 new Missions open and operational. To date, new Embassies have opened in Wellington, Bogotá, Amman, Monrovia, Santiago de Chile, Rabat, Manila and Kyiv, and new Consulates General in Cardiff, Frankfurt, Los Angeles, Manchester, Mumbai and Vancouver. We will also be reopening our Embassy in Tehran in 2023 and the Government has approved the opening of a further four new Missions in Dakar, Lyon, Miami and Toronto. New Missions have been opened in locations chosen on the basis, inter alia, of their potential to diversify our markets and increase trade and investment with Ireland. New Missions have been opened in locations chosen on the basis, inter alia, of their potential to diversify our markets and increase trade and investment with Ireland.

Officers based at our Missions engage in economic and public diplomacy to advance Ireland's prosperity, as part of their overall duties to promote Ireland's interests and support our citizens. They work on a range of trade-related issues, including market access, regulatory compliance, visas, phyto-sanitary issues, and double taxation agreements. COVID-19 has impacted how everyone works, including our mission network. However, it has also provided opportunities for new ways of working and engaging, and has resulted in new tools and strategies for pursuing Ireland's interests. The Mission network also supports Ministerial visits and trade missions, in partnership with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, other Government Departments and the State Agencies, which support the goal of securing high-level market access for companies based in Ireland that are aiming to grow business overseas, and in general helping deepen bilateral relations as the context in which trade and investment takes place.

Question No. 236 answered with Question No. 214.

Question No. 237 answered with Question No. 227.

Passport Services

238. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if passports will be processed on time for travel arrangements for a family (details supplied) in County Mayo [4215/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): With regard to the applications about which the Deputy has enquired, the Passport Service has issued passports to the applicants.

Departmental Data

239. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Defence if his Department has commissioned any polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies within the remit of his Department for the period 1 January 2021 to date; if so, if he will provide details of the policies; the costs incurred for each individual poll; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4039/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department has not commissioned any polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies within the remit of my Department for the period 1 January 2021 to date and no related costs have been incurred.

Defence Forces

240. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Defence the outcome of the mediation between Kildare County Council and his Department in relation to the filling in of the hollow next to Donnelly's Hollow on the Curragh, County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4067/22]

241. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Defence if the person or persons responsible for the filling in of the hollow next to Donnelly's Hollow on the Curragh, County Kildare have been identified; the consequences for the person or persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4068/22]

242. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Defence the reason that it was necessary for mediation between Kildare County Council and his Department in relation to the filling in of the hollow next to Donnelly's Hollow on the Curragh, County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4069/22]

243. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Defence if his Department will bear the full cost of the mediation between Kildare County Council and his Department in relation to the filling in of the hollow next to Donnelly's Hollow on the Curragh, County Kildare given that his Department has been deemed responsible; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4070/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 240 to 243, inclusive, together.

As the Deputy will be aware, my Department has been engaging in legal correspondence with Kildare County Council on this matter. On foot of legal advices, it was agreed that the matter would be resolved through a mediation process between my Department and Kildare County Council.

Arising from same my Department reached a meditated agreement in late 2021 with Kildare County Council. As a result of which and in accordance with this agreement, my Department

will liaise with the local authority in the preparation and development of the required Environmental reports and agree on any follow up action arising from same. My Department has recently appointed Environmental Consultants to commence this work.

The cost to my Department of the mediation totalled €9,559.97. This amounted to 50% of the cost of the mediation process. It was agreed prior to the mediation that the costs would be split on a 50/50 basis between the two parties.

Question No. 241 answered with Question No. 240.

Question No. 242 answered with Question No. 240.

Question No. 243 answered with Question No. 240.

Defence Forces

244. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence if a former member of the Defence Forces currently in receipt of an Army pension based on 31 years service will be entitled to retain that full pension payment along with a full State contributory pension when they reach pension age; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4118/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): It is assumed that the Deputy is referring to the cessation of a portion of the military retirement pension of certain Defence Forces pensioners on qualifying for the Social Welfare State Pension (Contributory).

Under the Defence Forces occupational pension scheme applicable to Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) and Privates enlisting in the Defence Forces before April 2004, 21 years is the minimum service required for an immediate retirement pension and gratuity, regardless of age. Under this 'fast accrual' pension scheme, maximum retirement benefits accrue after 31 years. The 21-year pension, the rate of which varies according to retiring rank and other factors, is payable for the person's lifetime.

Where qualifying service is more than 21 years, an 'additional increment' is payable at a flat rate (generally €9.21 a week currently) for each year of service in excess of 21 years up to a maximum of 31 years' service. This gives a maximum additional increment of €92.10 weekly. However, under the 'pre-April 2004' pension scheme rules, this additional increment ceases to be payable if and when the pensioner reaches the prescribed age for the State Pension (Contributory), that is, at age 66 to 68 depending on a person's date of birth.

These arrangements are in accordance with the long established principle of integrating occupational pensions with Social Insurance benefits of employees who are in full PRSI class. This includes NCOs and Privates who are fully insured for the range of social insurance benefits under the Social Welfare Acts, such as the State Pension (Contributory).

Integration means that a person's entitlement to social insurance benefits is taken into account when calculating the rate of their occupational pension payable. In an integrated pension scheme, the State Pension or similar contributory Social Welfare benefit is regarded as part of the overall pension package payable to the individual. The integration principle applies right across the public service and, indeed, in many areas of the private sector as well as in other countries.

It might be noted that the method of integration for these 'pre-April 2004' military pensioners is in fact more favourable than in other areas of the public service. In the public service

generally, integration begins from the time the occupational pension commences payment, for example from age 60/65 where ‘standard accrual’ pensions apply in pre-2013 public service schemes.

Furthermore, the maximum personal rate of State Pension payable (€253.30 a week currently if under age 80) is considerably more than any reduction that could happen under the Defence Forces pension schemes by virtue of the loss of the additional increment on qualification for the State Pension. This is the scenario for any former member who retires with between 22 and 31 years’ service under the ‘pre-April 2004’ pension scheme.

The foregoing atypical integration arrangements do not apply to NCOs and Privates enlisting on or after 1 April 2004, and whose occupational pensions are subject to standard integration with social insurance benefits along with other public service employees insured for full PRSI.

Military Exercises

245. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Defence if he and or the Defence Forces staff met with Russian officials, diplomats or military staff in respect of Russian plans to conduct artillery drills off the coast of this jurisdiction (details supplied); and if so, if he will publish minutes and or memos attached to those meetings. [4134/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I have not met with any Russian officials, diplomats or military staff in relation to plans for Russian naval exercises off the south-west coast of Ireland in early February. In my capacity as Minister for Foreign Affairs, I have spoken to the Russian Ambassador to convey the Government’s concerns in respect of these exercises, particularly in light of the current political and security environment in Europe.

The Russian Ambassador paid a courtesy visit to the new Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces on 21 January. It is normal practice that foreign ambassadors and or defence attachés would pay routine courtesy calls on a newly appointed Chief of Staff. Since his appointment in September 2021, he has had a number of such meetings with foreign ambassadors and defence attachés and others are foreseen over the coming weeks.

There was no discussion in the course of this meeting about the forthcoming Russian naval exercises in the Atlantic.

Defence Forces

246. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Defence the number of personnel in the Defence Forces in its various areas over the past five years in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4166/22]

249. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which efforts continue to ensure the maintenance of the strength of the Army, Naval Service and Air Corps at optimum levels having particular regard to Ireland’s position on the periphery of Europe and its extended coastline; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4190/22]

255. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which he remains assured that no attempt is being made to reduce the strength of any branch of the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4196/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 246, 249 and 255 together.

As at 31 December 2021, the strength of the PDF was 8,468 whole time equivalent personnel comprised of 6,841 Army, 876 Naval Service and 751 Air Corps. There is an establishment of 9,500 personnel for the Permanent Defence Force, 7,520 for the Army, 1,094 for the Naval Service, and 996 for the Air Corps which the Government remains committed to returning to and maintaining. The manpower requirement of the Defence Forces is monitored on an ongoing basis in accordance with the operational requirements of each of the three services. The Naval Service, for example, continues to carry out the roles assigned by Government, including fishery protection and security operations with aerial assistance in patrolling the Irish Exclusive Economic Zone provided by the Air Corps Maritime Patrol Squadron.

The strength, by Branch, for each of the past five years is attached.

Permanent Defence Force Strength (WTE)

Year	Army	Air Corps	Naval Service	Total
2021	6,841	751	876	8,468
2020	6,923	746	903	8,572
2019	7,002	721	936	8,659
2018	7,243	725	989	8,957
2017	7,386	734	1,053	9,173

A range of actions have been taken to address recruitment and retention issues in the Permanent Defence Force and bridge the shortfall between the current strength figures and those of the establishment.

Ongoing recruitment initiatives resulted in a total of 576 personnel being inducted in 2021. While the 2022 Recruitment Plan is not yet finalised, the Defence Forces remain committed to optimising the number of personnel inducted.

The scope of direct entry competitions, along with the terms and conditions, continue to be expanded and revised to improve intakes. The re-entry campaign for former members of the PDF continues.

Concurrent retention initiatives such as a service commitment schemes in the Air Corps (for pilots) and the Naval Service have been launched. The PSPC report on recruitment and retention in the Defence Forces made a range of recommendations with a view to addressing recruitment and retention issues and these have been progressed through a series of projects.

Additionally, the Commission on the Defence Forces is finalising its work with a view to completing their Report as soon as possible. The Commission's Report, when submitted, will be fully considered at that point.

The Government is committed to retaining the capacity of the Defence Forces to operate effectively.

Defence Forces

247. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which Ireland can rely on the European Union for the resources necessary to ensure the future availability of adequate coastal surveillance, air sea rescue or other services necessary for an island nation

inside the European Union but some distance from the European mainland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4188/22]

248. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence if the European Union will offer assistance towards the replacement and or upkeep and operation of air and sea rescue and or other services given the nature of the Irish coastline and the possible exploitation by others of perceived weakness; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4189/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 247 and 248 together.

The Naval Service, as the State's principal sea-going agency, is tasked with a variety of defence and other roles. While the main 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, it also carries out a number of other non-fishery related tasks in tandem with maritime surveillance, and as such any Naval Service patrol should be viewed as a multi-faceted activity.

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

The Naval Service and the Air Corps provide assistance and support to search and rescue missions on an as available basis, however, the lead agency for search and rescue (SAR) in Ireland's SAR domain is the Irish Coast Guard.

In terms of fishery protection the Naval Service is tasked with patrolling all Irish waters from the shoreline to the outer limits of the EEZ. These patrols are carried out on a regular and frequent basis and are directed to all areas of Irish waters as necessary. The Sea Fisheries Protection Authority are the competent authority in relation to fisheries control in Ireland's EEZ.

My Department has applied for EU funding in support of the Defence Forces via the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) Operational Programme (2014-2020). Approval in principle has been received for a number of relevant projects, including projects specifically linked to Naval Service and Air Corps capabilities and operations.

My Department has also begun discussions with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to investigate the possibility of securing additional future funding to support Naval Service and Air Corps operations under the new European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) 2021 – 2027.

Ireland is currently involved in an European Defence Agency project named Maritime Surveillance (MARSUR) Networking - Operations Support & Development (MARSUR III). This is the third iteration of the MARSUR projects. The main objective of the EDA Maritime Surveillance programme is to further develop a Recognised Maritime Picture (RMP) exchange network amongst Member States. An RMP is a picture or map that shows all vessels and activities that are present in a particular maritime area. It links to national and international data and information on vessels, the marine environment, infrastructure etc. that has been compiled from various monitoring and surveillance systems. The MARSUR Project continues to enhance, upgrade and develop the capability for participating Member States to share different levels of classified information across the network.

The MARSUR projects have assisted Member States, including Ireland, to combat drug trafficking, smuggling, illegal immigration and migration and international terrorism. Better exchange of information plays an important part in protecting maritime trade, the maritime

environment and natural resources.

As a committed EU Member State, Ireland supports fully the efforts of EU Member States to improve the Union's capacity to respond to the prevailing challenging security environment, including in the area of defence.

Question No. 248 answered with Question No. 247.

Question No. 249 answered with Question No. 246.

Naval Service

250. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the steps in hand or being taken to ensure the availability for service of all Naval Service vessels at all times; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4191/22]

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 main 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 relation to fisheries 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. I am advised that the fleet is managed to ensure maximum availability to meet operational requirements.

On any given patrol day the Naval Service can carry out a number of taskings on behalf of other State agencies such as the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority, An Garda Síochána and the Customs Service of the Revenue Commissioners.

At any one time the Naval Service can have a number of ships that are on active operations around the Irish EEZ whilst a number of others are undergoing routine resupply, maintenance and down time for ships companies.

The operational patrol profile of the ships cannot be discussed in detail due to the security implications to ongoing operations, however, Naval Operations Command operate a rotating patrol schedule to maintain a constant presence in the Irish EEZ.

The White Paper on Defence sets out an ambitious programme of capital investment in the Naval Service, including the mid-life refit and upgrade of the P50 class of vessels, and the replacement of the flagship LÉ Eithne with a multi-role vessel. The MRV, is an important element of the Defence Equipment Development Plan and is provided for in the Government's National Development Plan as a major capital project. It is the Government's intention that this new vessel will provide a flexible and adaptive capability for a wide range of maritime tasks.

Projects for other vessel replacements, such as the replacement of the Coastal Patrol Vessels, the LÉ Ciara and LÉ Orla will be considered over the lifetime of the White Paper on Defence in the context of overall capability development and funding along with the overall Equipment Development Plan process. These ships will be replaced with similar sized vessels with countermine and counter-IED capabilities. This will provide an enhanced capability for the Naval Service in meeting a broad range of ongoing requirements and contingencies, including the protection of Ireland's vital sea lanes of communication.

Current recruitment initiatives are aimed at increasing the number of available sailors with-

in the Naval Service in order to restore the full fleet to operational status. The recruitment and retention of technical and non-technical personnel for the Naval Service is central to the on-going Naval Service Regeneration plan. My focus is on returning the Naval Service to its full capacity.

Air Corps

251. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the steps in hand or being taken to ensure the availability for service of all Air Corps equipment at all times; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4192/22]

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

All Air Corps aircraft and equipment are maintained in accordance with the Air Corps' maintenance regulations, the Air Regulation Manual Part E (ARM E). The ARM E ensures that all maintenance is carried out in accordance with manufacturer's recommendations, and in adherence to industry best standards. Maintenance schedules are planned in so far as possible with a view to maximising fleet availability.

The aircraft are made available in accordance with scheduled operations and non-scheduled operations. Service Level Agreements (SLA) stipulate the amount of hours dedicated to each area, as well as the required availability. Where SLAs are not applicable to an operation, Air Corps Headquarters directs the respective Units to have aircraft available, as necessary.

The Equipment Development Plan (EDP) published in June 2020, completed through extensive joint civil-military work, provides a comprehensive list of planned equipment projects by means of a five-year rolling plan. The EDP builds on the intentions set out in the White Paper in relation to equipment acquisition, modernisation and upgrade and has been developed to ensure that the Defence Forces have the major equipment platforms, ancillary equipment and force protection equipment to carry out their important roles both at home and overseas.

A step change in military air-based capability is being achieved through the delivery into service of Pilatus PC-12 aircraft. While nominally a replacement for the Cessna, the new aircraft move capabilities considerably ahead of the previous level. The original order of three aircraft which were delivered in September 2020 was augmented on an urgent basis by an additional aircraft delivered in April 2020 to enhance fixed wing capacity to meet demands arising from Covid-19.

During the Covid-19 Pandemic, the strategic use of State aircraft ensured the continuity of operations, both domestically and overseas, which had been impacted by the worldwide restrictions on civilian air transport services. In 2020, the Air Corps utilised fixed wing assets to conduct over 125 military transport missions involving the movement of Defence Force personnel (incl. MEDEVAC), equipment and PPE to Defence Overseas missions with a further increase in Air Corps flights in 2021.

The White Paper also provides for the replacement of the CASA 235s with consideration to be given to their replacement with larger more capable aircraft. A contract for the supply of two C295 Maritime Patrol Aircraft was entered into with Airbus Defence and Space in December 2019, with delivery of the aircraft expected in 2023. The cost of the contract including ancillary support is €229m inclusive of VAT. In addition to the principal role of maritime surveillance,

particularly fishery protection, the aircraft will also enable the Air Corps to provide a wide range of services including logistics support and transport of troops and equipment, medical evacuation and air ambulance, search and rescue and a general utility role.

This significant investment in maritime patrol aircraft is an example which demonstrates my commitment to update and upgrade the Defence Forces equipment and capability, within the financial envelope available.

I am satisfied that the Defence Forces, including the Air Corps have the necessary modern and effective range of equipment available to them which is in line with best international standards in order to fulfil all roles assigned to them by Government.

Defence Forces

252. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which the recruitment of women to the Army, Naval Service and Air Corps continues to receive attention; if the numbers responding is indicative of an awareness of the need to ensure adequate gender balance in the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4193/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): It is Government policy to increase female participation rates at all levels of the Defence Forces in order to increase capability and to better reflect the society from which the Defence Forces are drawn and serve.

As of 31 December 2021, the strength of the Permanent Defence Force (PDF) stood at 8,468 Whole Time Equivalent (WTE) personnel. Of this some 598 personnel or 7% were female, broken down as follows:

- Army: 488 Female Personnel
- Air Corps: 39 Female Personnel
- Naval Service: 71 Female Personnel

In the two general service recruitment campaigns conducted in 2021, approximately 11% of the Applicants were female while the figure for cadet Applicants was approximately 15%.

In line with current policies and commitments a number of initiatives have been implemented to increase the level of female participation in the Permanent Defence Force. For example:

- Special consideration is paid to women as a target group for recruitment within the general recruitment framework, including a Female Recruitment Standing Committee reporting on initiatives for 2022, with dedicated female recruitment teams proposed. In addition, a female specific “Always on” (constant targeting of the female demographic) campaign commenced in October 2021.

- The Defence Forces actively engage with schools to conduct career talks and regularly attend events aimed at future career choices for schools.

- A Gender Equality and Diversity Officer has been appointed to promote gender equality policies and training within the Defence Forces. The Defence Forces are committed to gender equality and employ a gender perspective in the planning and execution of operations both at home and overseas and in all policies and regulations. Gender Advisors are available to all Brigades and Services and trained Gender Focal Points are deployed with all overseas units and

ships in order to promote a gender perspective in operations.

- A Defence Forces Women's Network was established with the aim of increasing the participation of female personnel at all levels of the organisation.

Over the lifetime of the White Paper on Defence, a number of projects will be progressed to ensure the development and promotion of strategies that continue to support increased female participation in the Defence Forces.

In addition, a review of recruitment practices and processes in the PDF, tasked under the High Level Implementation Plan arising from the Public Service Pay Commission report, has additionally examined all aspects of the recruitment process, including diversity, as part of its work. I have recently approved the final report.

The Government remains committed to a policy of equal opportunity for men and women throughout the Defence Forces and to the full participation by women in all aspects of Defence Forces activities.

Defence Forces

253. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which all branches of the Defence Forces, that is, the Army, Naval Service and Air Corps with Reserves have adequate training upgrades with a view to ensuring smooth operation in the field as and when necessary; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4194/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The primary function of training in the Defence Forces is to develop and maintain the capabilities necessary to enable them to fulfil the roles laid down by Government. The Defence Forces conduct training under four broad categories, namely; Leadership, Skills, Career, and Collective. Leadership Training is the medium through which the Defence Forces ensure that personnel are prepared for exercising command authority across the full range of military functions both at home and overseas in international operations. Skills Training ensures that Defence Forces personnel have the requisite individual, specialist, and crew skills. Career Training, and education, provides the organisation with the necessary pool of leaders and commanders at all levels. Collective Training allows military personnel to use their individual, crew, specialist and career training together, to develop integrated and coherent combat forces.

The scheduling of training in the Defence Forces, including the Reserve, is underpinned by an analysis of training required to meet operational output and capability development requirements.

The Defence Forces seek to constantly benchmark training across all three arms of the organisation against best military and academic practice. Military best practice is ensured by implementing a policy of standardisation that is in line with EU and NATO/Partnership for Peace partners. Academic best practice is ensured by benchmarking courses through accreditation under the National Framework of Qualifications which is validated by Quality and Qualifications Ireland. The Defence Forces deliver military programmes and modules meeting national and international standards and engage with external educational institutions in order to facilitate organisational learning. This engagement with national and international educational institutions, military and civilian, aims to ensure that the Defence Forces retain currency with regards to best international practice and employ all relevant modern training methods.

I remain committed to ensuring that all personnel of the Defence Forces continue to be

trained to appropriate standards.

Naval Service

254. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which all seagoing and military equipment in the Naval Service is being upgraded and updated in line with requirements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4195/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Equipment priorities for the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service are considered in the context of the lifetime of the White Paper on Defence as part of the capability development and Equipment Development Planning (EDP) process.

In this context, the principal aim over the period of the White Paper is to replace and upgrade, as required, capabilities in order to retain a flexible response for a wide range of operational requirements at home and overseas.

The White Paper on Defence sets out an ambitious programme of capital investment in the Naval Service including the mid-life refit and upgrade of the P50 class vessels, LÉ Róisín and LÉ Niamh, as well as the replacement of LÉ Eithne. The P50 mid-life upgrade programme is well underway, with the return to operations of LÉ Róisín and works are ongoing on LÉ Niamh.

The replacement of the flagship LÉ Eithne with a multi-role vessel, MRV, is an important element of the EDP and is provided for in the Government's NDP as a major capital project. It is the intention that this new vessel will provide a flexible and adaptive capability for a wide range of maritime tasks. Following a public tender competition, Marine Advisors have been appointed to support the procurement of the MRV. This work is now underway and will inform a public tender competition in due course.

Projects for other vessel replacements and equipment for the Naval Service are being considered in the context of overall capability development and funding along with the overall EDP process.

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

Question No. 255 answered with Question No. 246.

Defence Forces

256. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which the necessary radar and other tracking equipment remains available to all branches of the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4197/22]

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

The Equipment Development Plan (EDP) published in June 2020 was completed follow-

ing extensive joint civil-military work. It provides a comprehensive list of planned equipment projects which will be progressed over five years. This plan builds on the intentions set out in the White Paper in relation to equipment acquisition, modernisation and upgrade and has been developed to ensure that our Defence Forces have the major equipment platforms, ancillary equipment and force protection equipment to carry out their important roles both at home and overseas.

The Equipment Planning process recognises the need to maintain and upgrade military capabilities having regard to emerging operational requirements and changes in technology and this is an ongoing process.

Modern secure communications are essential for the Defence Forces and in that regard Defence Force personnel are suitably equipped in a variety of roles with required communications and global positioning systems (GPS) equipment. GPS systems are used to aid navigation and as a force protection measure. They are integrated on board vehicles, vessels and aircraft control systems and embedded in communications systems used by Defence Force personnel in order to achieve a Joint Common Operating Picture.

I am advised by the Military Authorities that the Defence Forces operate many different types of radar systems. Existing capabilities available to the Army include radar systems such as the Giraffe Mk4 short-range air defence system and the Foxtrack X-Band ground surveillance radar. The Air Corps use surface search radar on the CASA 235 maritime patrol aircraft and all aircraft are fitted with a transponder and the automatic identification system (AIS) for identification and tracking. The Naval Service use maritime surface search radar and the Recognised Maritime Picture (RMP) systems for surveillance and tracking.

It remains Government policy, as per the 2015 White Paper on Defence, that should additional funding, beyond that provided for in existing plans becomes available, the development of a radar surveillance capability for the Air Corps, will be considered.

The Deputy will be aware that the Government established an independent Commission on the Defence Forces in December 2020. The work of the Commission encompasses the consideration of appropriate military equipment capabilities, structures and staffing, and their report will inform decisions regarding the future development of the Defence Forces.

Defence Forces

257. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which members of the Defence Forces are currently deployed overseas; the number involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4198/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): As of 1 January 2022, Ireland is contributing 582 personnel to 9 different missions throughout the world. The main overseas missions in which Defence Forces personnel are currently deployed are the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) with 355 personnel and the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) in Syria with 134 personnel. Ireland also contributes observers and staff to various United Nations and OSCE missions and personnel to staff appointments at UN, EU, NATO/PfP and OSCE headquarters.

Ireland has always been a strong supporter of the United Nations and UN Peacekeeping. Our commitment and support for the primary role of the United Nations, in the maintenance of international peace and security, is expressed in Ireland's long-standing tradition of participating in UN peacekeeping operations. This commitment is also expressed in our engagement in

the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

Full details of all personnel currently serving in missions overseas are listed in the tabular statement below.

MEMBERS OF THE PERMANENT DEFENCE FORCE SERVING OVERSEAS As of 1 January 2022

UN MISSIONS	
UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) HQUNIFIL 119th Infantry BattalionUNIFIL Sector West HQ	93424
UNTSO (United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation) Israel & Syria	12
MINUSMA (United Nations mission in MALI)	14
MONUSCO (United Nations Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic of the Congo)	3
UNDOF (COS Staff/FHQ Staff - Camp Faouar - Bravo side) UNDOF 64th Infantry Group (Camp Faouar - Bravo side)	8126
TOTAL	518
UN MANDATED MISSIONS	
EUFOR (EU-led Operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina)	5
EUTM Mali (EU-led Training Mission)	20
KFOR (International Security Presence in Kosovo) HQ	13
Naval Service EU Mission (Op Irini HQ)	3
TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONNEL SERVING WITH UN MISSIONS	559
ORGANISATION FOR SECURITY AND CO-OPERATION IN EUROPE (OSCE)	
Staff Officer, High Level Planning Group, Vienna	1
EU MILITARY STAFF	
Brussels	8
MILITARY REPRESENTATIVES/ADVISERS/STAFF	
Military Adviser, Permanent Mission to UN, New York	3*
Military Adviser, Irish Delegation to OSCE, Vienna	1
Military Representative in PSC Delegation (Brussels)	4
Liaison Office of Ireland, NATO/PfP (Brussels)	3
EU OHQ Operation Althea, Mons, Belgium	1
Irish Liaison Officer to SHAPE & Military Co-Op Division, Mons, Belgium	1
Military C-IED expert, UN Training Entebbe	1
TOTAL NUMBER OF DEFENCE FORCES PERSONNEL SERVING OVERSEAS	582

* Includes Major General Maureen O'Brien serving on secondment to the United Nations following her appointment by the UN as Deputy Military Advisor in the Office of Military Affairs,

258. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence if payments in respect of troop deployment overseas have been brought up to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4199/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): In general, Overseas and Armed Peace Support allowances are paid along with the pay of the members of the Permanent Defence Force serving overseas and payment is commenced following notification from the military authorities that a member has proceeded overseas on a particular mission. Payment of the allowances is then ceased following notification of his/her return from overseas. From time to time there are variations in planned departure and return dates and, once notified by the military authorities, the relevant allowances are adjusted on the next possible pay date.

In addition, my Department is in the process of paying a number of allowances in relation to mission leave and other matters to personnel who have now returned from overseas duty. Where all necessary information is to hand these payments will be made in the coming weeks. Any remaining allowances due will be paid on receipt of the outstanding information required.

Defence Forces

259. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which allegations of abuse within the Defence Forces have been fully investigated and preventative measures put in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4200/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): A key priority for me as Minister for Defence is my duty of care obligation to all members of the Defence Forces. I am fully committed to ensuring that every member has the right to be treated with dignity, equality and respect to carry out their duties in a safe workplace underpinned by a culture of zero-tolerance for any kind of bullying, discrimination, harassment or sexual abuse.

As the Deputy is aware, this week I announced the establishment of an Independent Review to examine issues relating to unacceptable behaviour in the workplace. The Independent Review will:

- examine current legislative frameworks, policies, procedures and practices,
- assess the pervading culture in the workplace, and on the basis of this work,
- make recommendations on measures and strategies required to underpin a workplace based on dignity, equality mutual respect, and duty of care for every member of the Defence Forces.

Over the last twenty years since the 2002 publication of the External Advisory Group on the Defence Forces and the three subsequent reports from the Independent Monitoring Group (IMG), a number of reforms have been implemented for addressing allegations of inappropriate behaviour, including harassment, sexual harassment and bullying, which are contained in policy documents and in Defence Force regulation.

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

Despite the reforms that have taken place, current and former members of the Defence Forces have been clear that the culture that is pervading, and the application of those policies, systems and procedures for dealing with unacceptable behaviour have not, and are not serving

all Defence Forces personnel well.

It is of critical importance therefore that I proceed with this Review to ensure that the workplace is safe for all serving members.

Defence Forces

260. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which retirements throughout the Defence Forces are due in 2022; the plans for replacement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4201/22]

263. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the number of promotional positions to be filled in each branch of the Defence Forces; the number of new positions likely to arise over 2022; if all positions will be filled on becoming vacant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4204/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 260 and 263 together.

As at 31 December 2021, the following vacancies existed in the Permanent Defence Force:

-	Strength	Establishment	Vacancies
Army	6,841	7,520	679
Air Corps	751	886	135
Naval Service	876	1,094	218
Total	8,468	9,500	1,032

Vacancies are filled on an ongoing basis in line with promotional arrangements and, in certain cases, direct entry competitions and re-entry of ex PDF personnel. It is not possible to give a precise estimate of future vacancies as this would be influenced by a range of factors such as the timing of departures, inductions and promotions etc.

The military authorities have advised that there are 91 personnel due to retire in 2022 on age grounds, which is the only category that can be predicted with any accuracy.

A number of initiatives are being implemented to counter current staffing challenges and these will play a role in restoring and retaining capacity.

Defence Forces

261. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which pay and conditions in the Defence Forces have been addressed or resolved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4202/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Defence Forces are paid increases in pay and allowances in line with Public Service pay agreements.

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. In addition, fixed periodic pensionable allowances, as well as allowances in the nature of pay,

were also increased by 1% on this date.

The current pay agreement also provides for further increases in 2022, namely:

- 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. Fixed periodic pensionable allowances and allowances in the nature of pay will also be increased by 1% on this date.

In addition to general round pay increases, arising from pay agreements, members of the Permanent Defence Force have also benefitted from the implementation of increases in Defence Forces allowances, as recommended by the Public Service Pay Commission in 2019.

The Government remains fully committed to addressing pay and conditions in the Defence Forces. The Commission on the Defence Forces, which was established by Government, includes in its terms of reference, 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 shortly and I look forward to receiving this document, in due course. The recommendations will then be fully considered and will inform future decisions regarding the Defence Forces

As provided for in the Programme for Government, I will then consult with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform on the establishment of a permanent pay review body, reflecting the unique nature of military service in the context of the Public Service.

Defence Forces

262. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which the military authorities in the Army, Naval Service and Air Corps continue to be adequately resourced to meet possible challenges arising from a terrorist attack, natural disasters or other security issues; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4203/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Defence Organisation provides a broad range of services in accordance with its primary security role while it also undertakes a diverse range of non security related tasks. The Defence Forces continue to carry out the roles assigned by Government, including security operations, critical supports to An Garda Síochána and supports to other Government Departments and Principal Response Agencies. In particular, in recent times, the Defence Forces have played an important role in the Covid 19 response through providing a broad range of supports to the HSE which has provided surge support to our health services through bolstering their capacity and providing them with the additional resiliency needed to respond to the Covid 19 pandemic.

My priority as Minister for Defence is to ensure that the operational capability of the Defence Forces is maintained to enable the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service to carry out their roles as assigned by Government.

At National level, representation on the Government Task Force on Emergency Planning by both the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces, ensures the fullest coordination and cooperation in the event of an emergency.

In accordance with the Framework for Major Emergency Management, primary respon-

sibility for responding to emergencies such as severe weather events or terrorist attacks rests with the three designated principal response agencies, namely, the relevant Local Authority, An Garda Síochána, and the Health Service Executive. The Defence Forces provides assistance within means to the appropriate Lead Department or Principal Response Agency in the event of a natural disaster or an emergency situation in its Aid to the Civil Authority (ATCA) and Aid to the Civil Power (ATCP) roles.

In respect of security threats, responsibility for the internal security of the State rests with the Department of Justice and Equality and An Garda Síochána. In that regard, among the roles assigned to the Defence Forces in the White Paper on Defence (2015) is the provision of ATCP which, in practice, means to provide assistance and support to An Garda Síochána when requested to do so. There is on-going and close liaison between An Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces regarding security matters, including ATCP deployments and includes military training activities which are specifically designed to respond to possible security emergencies. Regular coordination and liaison meetings also take place between the Defence Forces and An Garda Síochána in relation to ATCP issues.

The Government established an independent Commission on the Defence Forces in December 2020. 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. The Commission are finalising their work with a view to completing the Report as soon as possible.

I am committed to ensuring that the personnel of the Defence Forces continue to be equipped and trained to best international standards and I can confirm that the Defence Forces keep their operational plans and response capabilities for dealing with a wide range of threats and emergencies under constant review. I am satisfied that the Defence Forces will continue to respond in an effective and timely manner to such events were they to occur in the state.

Question No. 263 answered with Question No. 260.

Defence Forces

264. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which accommodation at military barracks is modern, up-to-date and in keeping with best practice; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4205/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Defence Forces Built Infrastructural Programme 2020-2025 was published in January 2020. This Programme, which is a 5 year plan, provides a blueprint for investment in the Defence Forces built infrastructure over a multi annual timeframe.

As the Deputy may be aware it has been a long standing policy, since the 1990's that the provision of Married Quarters to serving Defence Forces personnel would be discontinued. This move away from this provision was accepted by senior military management at the time and it is not intended to reverse this policy. Single Living in Accommodation is provided for personnel where same is required for training and operational purposes.

The modernisation of such accommodation features significantly in the Defence Forces 5 Year Infrastructure Plan, which has seen the completion of the following refurbishment projects at a combined cost of €11.2m:

- Blocks B & D Pearse Barracks, DFTC ;
- Block 7 Plunket Barracks, DFTC ;
- Blocks 1 & 2 Cathal Brugha Barracks; and the
- Apprentice Hostel, Casement Aerodrome.

The following accommodation projects are now also being progressed at combined estimated value of €26.5m :

- Refurbishment of Blocks 4 & 8, Naval Service,
- New accommodation Block in Collins barracks, Cork, and
- the refurbishment of the USAC accommodation Block in Renmore, Galway.

The Deputy may also wish to note that my Department has allocated in the region of €10m this year to the Defence Forces for the maintenance, repair and upkeep of its building stock. This devolved budget is a regular feature of the Delegated functions assigned to the Defence Forces by my Department. The individual prioritisation of specific projects to be carried out is solely a matter for the Defence Forces in keeping with the delegated nature of this budget.

School Enrolments

265. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Education if her Department plans to provide additional first year places at a school (details supplied) to meet the demand for the 2022-2023 school year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [3991/22]

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.

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.

My Department has examined the school planning areas for which the school referred to by

the Deputy was established as a regional solution and is satisfied that the first year places being offered by schools in the two school planning areas concerned will cater for the projected demand for 2022/23.

School Transport

266. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education the status of the review by her Department of the school transport scheme. [3995/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the current school year over 121,400 children, including over 15,500 children with special educational needs, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €289m in 2021.

As the Deputy is aware, my Department commenced a review of the School Transport Scheme in February 2021. The review is being conducted with a view to examining the current scheme and how it currently operates, its broader effectiveness and sustainability and that it adequately supports the provision of services to students and their families.

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

Following commencement of this review the Steering Group presented me with an initial interim report on eligibility with an examination of issues for mainstream pupils relating to the nearest and next nearest school. Following consideration of this report, I approved the extension of temporary alleviation measures in the current school year for transport for post-primary students who are otherwise eligible for school transport but are attending their second nearest school and have applied and paid on time.

Wider considerations relating to operation of the scheme are now taking place in the next phase of the review which is currently underway. The Steering Group will continue to report to me on an interim basis as the review progresses. While work on the review has been impacted somewhat by the ongoing challenges of the pandemic, efforts are continuing to complete the review as close as possible to the previously announced timeline of end of quarter 1 2022.

After-School Support Services

267. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Education the grant funding available for afterschool clubs or activities; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4002/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Development of guidelines for all schools to support extra-curricular activities in schools is currently underway in my Department. These guidelines will facilitate schools in the provision, on a voluntary basis, of extra-curricular activities after school hours.

With regard to funding provision my Department provides a number of policies and programmes which are supportive of afterschool clubs or activities for students at risk of educa-

tional disadvantage.

DEIS – Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools is the main policy initiative of the Department of Education to address educational disadvantage at school level. In the 2021/22 academic year there are 884 schools (687 Primary and 197 Post Primary) in the DEIS Programme serving over 180,000 pupils. My Department spent over €150 million on the DEIS Programme in 2021, which included over €26 million for the School Completion Programme.

Budget 2022 has allocated the largest-ever increase in funding for the DEIS programme, providing for an additional allocation of €18 million in 2022 and rising to an additional €32 million in 2023. This means that by 2023 my Department will target over €180 million at addressing educational disadvantage through the DEIS programme, an increase of 20%.

All DEIS schools receive a DEIS grant which is to be used to support the implementation of the schools' DEIS Action Plan for Improvement. This Plan sets targets under key themes, such as attendance, retention, progression, literacy and numeracy, partnership, transition, wellbeing and examination attainment (post-primary only). A key focus of these themes is that they are targeted at those students most at risk of educational disadvantage. It is a matter for the school Board of Management to allocate DEIS grant funding so that it targets those students deemed most in need; this can include afterschool activities.

The School Completion Programme (SCP) is a key support under my Department's DEIS programme. SCP supports students in relation to school attendance, participation and retention. These interventions and supports may include afterschool clubs, which are allowable under the SCP funding. In March 2021 I announced a 5% increase in funding for the School Completion Programme to support the attendance and participation of vulnerable learners and those at risk of education disadvantage.

School Accommodation

268. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Education the status of the progress and timelines for delivery of a new school accommodation for post-primary schools (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4006/22]

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

Holy Family Community School, Rathcoole (RN 91301D)

The project referred to by the Deputy is currently at an advanced stage of architectural planning, Stage 2(b) Detailed Design, which includes the application for statutory approvals and the preparation of tender documents. All statutory approvals have been secured. The Stage 2(b) report has been reviewed and the Design Team have submitted the Design Team Confirmations. The Design Team has recently completed the pre-qualification process.

As this project has a projected cost in excess of €20 million, it is a requirement under the Public Spending Code for the NDFA to carry out a Financial Robustness Check of the shortlist of prequalified main contractors.

Upon completion of this Financial Robustness Check and subject to no issues arising my Department will be in contact with the Design Team and school with regard to the further progression of this project to the next stage of architectural planning, Stage 3 - Tender. Subject to no issues arising a tender normally takes between 6 and 8 months to complete.

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

The major building project for the school referred to by the Deputy recently completed Stage 2(b) Detailed Design and was authorised to proceed to tender stage on 27th October. A Tender stage normally takes between 6-8 months to complete. The project is expected to commence on site in Quarter 2 of 2022.

Griffeen Community College (RN 76454S)

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

An application for planning permission for a 1,000 pupil post-primary school building, including a 4 classroom Special Educational Needs Unit, was submitted to the relevant Local Authority in June 2021. A Request for Further Information (RFI) was received on 27th July 2021 and the response submitted to the local authority on 7th December 2021. A Clarification of Further Information was received from the Local Authority on 12th January 2022 with the response submitted to the local authority on 24th January 2022.

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

Lucan Community College (RN 70080T)

This project is at an advanced stage of architectural planning, Stage 2(b) Detailed Design, which includes the application for statutory approvals and the preparation of tender documents. The Stage 2(b) report has been reviewed and the Design Team has carried out a final review of all tender documentation. The pre-qualification process, to select a shortlist of candidates to whom the project will be tendered, is completed. The Design Team are preparing an application for Planning Permission as the existing Planning Permission is due to expire in July 2022. Upon grant of planning, my Department will be in contact with the school Patron with regard to the further progression of this project to the next stage of architectural planning, Stage 3 Tender Stage. Subject to no issues arising, a tender normally takes between 6 and 8 months to complete.

Schools Building Projects

269. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Education the status of the school building project for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4019/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I wish to advise that the school referred to by the Deputy will relocate to an existing building currently occupied on an interim basis by another school while awaiting the construction of a building project for that school.

In this regard, the building project for that school is at tender stage. The Design Team are currently preparing a fully compliant Stage 3 Tender Report, which will identify a recommended bidder. This report is expected to be submitted to my Department shortly.

Subject to no issues arising, it is envisaged that construction could commence in Quarter 2 2022, with an estimated completion timeframe of 18 months.

Questions - Written Answers
Schools Building Projects

270. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Education the status of the school building project for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4020/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy may be aware, agreement in principle has been reached with the Executive of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, subject to the approval of the Elected Members of the Council, for the sale of land at Mount Anville depot for the development of new permanent school facilities for Gaelscoil laighean.

Agreement has also been reached with Executive, subject to the approval of the Elected Members of the Council, to lease the same piece of land to the Department in order to facilitate the development of interim accommodation on this site until the start of the construction of the permanent facilities. The interim facilities are intended to be in place in time for the next school year, commencing September 2022.

The Department have been advised that the disposal and lease of this piece of land is to go to the Elected Member of the Council for decision early in 2022.

School Uniforms

271. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Education if she will make a recommendation that schools relax their uniform policies over the winter period to allow children to wear warmer clothing while the Covid-19 restrictions require additional ventilation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4030/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Under the Education Act 1998, all recognised schools are managed by the school board of management on behalf of the schools' patrons or trustees or the relevant Education and Training Board (known as the management authority).

Individual school authorities are responsible for the drawing up of a school policy in relation to the wearing of uniforms. Decisions on changes to school uniform policies are a matter for the schools at local level. Schools are advised to consult with parents and students when drafting a policy on uniforms.

The Student and Parent Charter Bill is currently progressing through the Dáil. The legislation particularly recognises the importance of listening to the voice of children and students. It is intended that the bill will enhance this by actively inviting and responding to comments and feedback from children in an age appropriate manner.

The Bill will enable students and parents to be better informed about matters relating to their school. Under national guidelines provided for in the legislation, schools will be required to provide a range of information to students and their parents on school plans and policies.

Departmental Data

272. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education if her Department has commissioned any polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies within the remit of her Department for the period 1 January 2021 to date; if so, if she will provide details of the policies; the costs incurred for each individual poll; and if she will make a statement on

the matter. [4040/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Department has not conducted any polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies for the period outlined.

Broadband Infrastructure

273. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Education if she will assist a school (details supplied) to improve its broadband connection; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4061/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department operates the Schools Broadband Programme at an annual cost of some €13m, providing connectivity to schools through a range of technologies at the best level of connectivity available based on local infrastructure. The school referred to by the Deputy is currently on the best available service of 12mb wireless broadband connection, which is a dedicated service to the school.

I have requested the Schools Broadband Service Desk, to work with the service provider to ensure that the current level of service is maintained as contracted to the school.

The school referred to by the Deputy is in the National Broadband Plan Intervention Area, for which implementation is underway. My Department is engaging with the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications on this implementation to prioritise school connectivity, with all schools in the NBP to be provided with high speed broadband infrastructure by the end of 2022. When the necessary infrastructure becomes available, the school will be upgraded to that service through the Schools Broadband Programme. My officials have confirmed with colleagues in the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications that this school in question is on the list for NBI infrastructure connectivity by end 2022.

Disadvantaged Status

274. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Education if she will clarify the DEIS status of a school (details supplied); and if it will be granted DEIS status following the forthcoming review. [4082/22]

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

This package follows an extensive body of work which has been undertaken by the DEIS technical group in relation to the development of a model to identify the concentrated levels of disadvantage of schools. The refined model is an objective, statistics based process, based on school enrolment data and data available from Census 2016 under the HP Deprivation Index. It is important to note that there is no application process for inclusion in the DEIS programme and all schools will be considered for inclusion when it is applied.

School Staff

275. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Education if she will continue banked

hours for all additional educational needs after mid-term (details supplied). [4099/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): While the Department has provided supports to schools to allow them to support their operation during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Department also recognises that given the current high case numbers schools will continue to require additional substitute cover. In the period leading up to the mid-term break (to 23rd February 2022) a range of measures have been put in place to assist in dealing with absences during this phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. These include flexibility around student teacher availability.

Given the current level of employee absences across sectors, including the education sector, the Department understands that some schools have on occasion had to use their non-mainstream, non-classroom teachers to maintain in-person education. In these circumstances the Department is conscious that these children may also have missed an opportunity to get additional support from their SET and is now permitting the banking of SET hours from January until the February mid-term break, in line with all of the additional measures to support schools during this phase of the pandemic. This is being kept under review.

Road Safety

276. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Education if she will provide a pedestrian crossing on the road in the ownership of her Department outside a school (details supplied) in collaboration with South Dublin County Council. [4102/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The road in question will ultimately be in the charge of the local authority referred to by the Deputy.

The ‘taking in charge’ process is ongoing and any queries in relation to the future installation of a pedestrian crossing at that location would be a matter for the local authority to consider.

Special Educational Needs

277. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Education the plans by her Department for the introduction of minimum education standards and qualifications for appointment as special needs assistants; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4119/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): 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 now in place 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.

School Transport

278. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Education if supports are available to assist families whose children have been unable to secure a school place within their locality and as such must incur large financial costs to transport their child to a school outside their locality; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4120/22]

279. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Education if she will consider introducing a financial support to assist families with the cost of school transport in cases which a child has been unable to secure a school placement in or near their locality and as a result must travel long distances to a school outside their locality at great personal financial cost. [4121/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 278 and 279 together.

School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the current school year over 121,400 children, including over 15,500 children with special educational needs, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €289m in 2021.

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

In general children are eligible for school transport if they meet the distance criteria and are attending their nearest school.

Children who are eligible for school transport and who complete the application process on time are accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation.

Children who are eligible for school transport but for whom no service is available may, following an application process for transport within the prescribed time limits, receive a Remote Area Grant towards the cost of private transport arrangements. The grant amount is distance related and is payable annually at a fixed daily rate (from €1.30 - €5.10 per day), to each eligible family, regardless of the number of children from the same family, travelling to a particular school.

Children who apply but who are not eligible for school transport are considered for spare seats that may exist after eligible children have been facilitated; such seats are referred to as concessionary seats.

In cases where the Department is satisfied that the nearest school is full, eligibility for school transport will be determined based on the distance that children reside from their next nearest school having regard to ethos and language. If a family require further information in regard to the closest school being full they can contact School Transport Section of my Department. Further information in this regard is available on my Department's website www.education.ie.

Question No. 279 answered with Question No. 278.

School Accommodation

280. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Education if an application for additional school accommodation has been received in regard to a school (details supplied); and the next steps with regard to this application; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4126/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I can confirm that my Department recently received an application for capital funding, under the Additional School Accommodation (ASA) scheme, from the school authority referred to by the Deputy.

The purpose of the ASA scheme is to ensure that essential mainstream classroom and Special Educational Needs (SEN) accommodation is available to cater for pupils enrolled each year, where the need cannot be met by the school's existing accommodation. At primary level, this situation generally arises to cater for a school's accommodation requirements where an additional teaching post has been sanctioned by my Department's Teacher Allocation Section, or a new Special Education Unit class has been sanctioned by the NCSE, and all available alternative accommodation within the school is already being used for classroom purposes.

On completion of the assessment process, the school authority will be contacted directly with a decision.

Teaching Council of Ireland

281. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Education the eligibility criteria for an application (details supplied) for Teaching Council registration. [4133/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Under the Teaching Council Acts 2001-2015 the Teaching Council is the body with the statutory authority and responsibility for the regulation of the teaching profession in Ireland including the registration of teachers in the State. It acts in the interests of the public good while upholding and enhancing standards in the teaching profession.

The Teaching Council assesses overseas qualifications in accordance with the Teaching Council (Registration) Regulations 2016 (Revised), the EU Recognition of Professional Qualifications Directive (2005/36/EC, as amended) and, in the case of teachers applying for registration as a post-primary teacher, the Teaching Council Curricular Subject Requirements (Post-Primary), 2017.

In accordance with the EU Directive 2005/36/EC, the qualifications of teachers who qualified outside of the Republic of Ireland are assessed to ensure that they are of a comparable standard to those achieved by graduates of accredited programmes in Ireland. Where significant differences arise, conditions (qualification shortfalls) will be applied to the teacher's registration.

I am informed by the Teaching Council that the individual referred to is registered with the Council under Route 1 (primary) and Route 3 (Further Education), in line with the assessment of qualifications process.

A person deemed to be a fully qualified teacher has completed a recognised teacher education qualification and programme of induction in the country in which they qualified and can provide an official letter from the relevant teacher registration body/Competent Authority or Ministry of Education confirming recognition as a fully qualified teacher in the State/country.

it is important that they registrants have any queries or issues around their registration, including the individual referred to by the Deputy, that they engage directly with the Teaching Council as the body, established by Statute to deal with and resolve these matters.

School Staff

282. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Education if the five-day rule for payment of student teachers has been lifted in order to accommodate student teachers in receiving full pay if they are covering absences in schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4159/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As recently announced, the Teaching Council is now working to put processes and procedures in place to support the registration and vetting of 3rd and 4th year student teachers. In addition, pending the development of those processes and procedures by the Teaching Council, the Department of Education is examining how the '5 day rule' is impacting 3rd and 4th year student teachers.

School Enrolments

283. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education her plans to increase the number of primary and secondary secular non-denominational school places in the Balgriffin area of Dublin; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4167/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy may be aware, for school planning purposes, my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and uses a Geographical Information System, utilising data from a range of sources including child ben-

efit data, departmental pupil databases, CSO statistics and information on recent and planned housing developments to forecast school place requirements at primary and post primary level.

Having considered the projected requirements in each school planning area, my Department then makes an assessment of the existing capacity within that particular area and its ability to meet any increased demand.

Where data indicates that additional provision is required at primary or post primary level, the delivery of such additional provision is dependent on the particular circumstances of each case and may be provided through either one, or a combination of, the following:

- Utilising existing unused capacity within a school or schools,
- Extending the capacity of a school or schools,
- Provision of a new school or schools.

Following such analysis in 2018, four new schools (two primary and two post primary) were announced to be established to serve the Donaghmede_Howth_D13 school planning area, within which Balgriffin is located.

A patronage process is run after it has been decided, based on demographic analysis, that a new school is required. This patronage process is open to all patron bodies and prospective patrons. Parental preferences for each patron, from parents of children who reside in the school planning areas concerned, together with the extent of diversity currently available in these areas, are key to decisions in relation to the outcome of this process.

The new Online Patronage Process System (OPPS) has been developed by my Department to provide objective information to all parents and guardians which will allow them to make an informed choice in expressing a preference for their preferred model of patronage for their child's education.

Three of the new schools in Donaghmede_Howth_D13 have been established and have had their patronage determined through a patronage process:

1. Stapolin Educate Together NS (primary)
2. Belmayne Educate Together SS (post primary)
3. Gaelscoil Ghráinne Mhaol (primary) (under the patronage of An Foras Pátrúnachta)

All three schools are multi-denominational in ethos.

Additionally, there are projects planned and in train at Grange Community College and Gaelcholáiste Reachrainn, both under the patronage of Dublin & Dun Laoghaire ETB, which are providing additional multi-denominational post primary school places in the area.

Further to this, the Schools Reconfiguration for Diversity process, supporting transfers of schools to multi-denominational patrons in response to the wishes of local families, has been developed in order to accelerate the delivery of multi-denominational schools across the country.

This Reconfiguration process involves the transfer of existing schools as opposed to the amalgamation and/or closure model of the patronage divesting process. The Department has been engaging with representatives of the Irish Episcopal Conference (Catholic bishops) as the majority patron of schools nationwide with a view to developing an agreed approach to the next

phase of the process. School communities who wish to explore the potential to transfer patronage should contact their school patron in the first instance.

State Examinations

284. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if a standardisation model was used in the leaving certificate 2019; and if so, the detail of the process of standardisation used by the State Examinations Commission prior to subsequent calculated grades and accredited grade models of standardisation. [4207/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The State Examinations Commission has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

In view of this I have forwarded your query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to you.

Early School Leavers

285. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the number of early school leavers in each of the years 2018 to 2021, in tabular form; and the latest data available for 2022, by county. [4209/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Estimates of Early School Leavers (ESL) are arrived at by subtracting the number of students who sat the Leaving Certificate in 2019 or received a calculated grade in 2020 from the number of pupils who entered first year in the 2014-15 school year. The entry cohort is adjusted for recorded emigration, deceased students and students who repeat based on six years of academic year data.

The ESL for 2021 will be calculated as part of the 2015 Retention Report, using the 2015-16 entry cohort and students who sat the LC or received a calculated grade in 2020 or 2021, and will be published in the third quarter of 2022.

[Early School Leavers-19]

School Funding

286. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the fact that schools are being forced to choose between HEPA filters and oil for heating under the minor works scheme. [4210/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): To provide additional support in the context of Covid-19 the payment of a minor works grant totalling €45m for primary schools and special schools, plus a once-off Covid-19 minor works funding of €17m for post-primary schools, was issued in December 2021. The minor works funding is a capital grant and provides good flexibility to address issues at local school level. The works that can be undertaken under the primary minor works scheme include maintenance and small-scale improvements to school buildings and grounds, improvement or replacement of mechanical and electrical services, the purchase of standard furniture and physical education equipment, the purchase of floor coverings and window blinds and the purchase of IT related equipment.

Given that each school setting is different, individual schools are best placed to decide how best to use this funding to address their particular needs. Specialist advice/assistance of a Chartered Engineer or Registered Architect is an important source of support for schools. This will help ensure that appropriate solutions are being put in place to address ventilation issues including advice on whether a HEPA Air Cleaner Unit is required to deal with a poorly ventilated room. Schools that identify inadequate ventilation in a room can utilise their minor work grant or apply for emergency works grant assistance to address ventilation enhancements where the minor work grant does not cover the full cost of the works required.

My Department also provides capitation funding to all recognised schools in the Free Education Scheme. The main grant is the capitation grant to cater for day to day running costs including heating costs.

My Department has ensured that centrally negotiated rates are available to schools for electricity and bulk heating fuels. These rates are available through existing frameworks sourced by the Office of Government Procurement (OGP). OGP has run competitions specifically for Schools at a national level and the Schools Procurement Unit and the Department has communicated with schools and school management bodies informing them of the options available to them through these national arrangements. Information on how to avail of these arrangements is available via the Schools Procurement Unit website, www.spu.ie.

As you are aware the Department has also issued additional funding to schools to support the implementation of infection prevention and control measures required to help minimise the risk of Covid-19. Funding has recently issued to cover the new term.

School Funding

287. Deputy Thomas Gould asked the Minister for Education if there is additional funding for heating available to schools. [4211/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department provides capitation funding to all recognised schools in the Free Education Scheme.

The main grant is the capitation grant to cater for day to day running costs including heating costs.

My Department has ensured that centrally negotiated rates are available to schools for electricity and bulk heating fuels. These rates are available through existing frameworks sourced by the Office of Government Procurement (OGP). OGP has run competitions specifically for Schools at a national level and the Schools Procurement Unit and the Department has communicated with schools and school management bodies informing them of the options available to them through these national arrangements. Information on how to avail of these arrangements is available via the Schools Procurement Unit website, www.spu.ie.

As you are aware the Department has issued additional funding to schools to support the implementation of infection prevention and control measures required to help minimise the risk of Covid-19. Funding has recently issued to cover the new term.

The public health guidance for schools operating during Covid-19 includes some important general recommendations about ventilation practices in schools. Ventilation guidance for schools was published by the Department in May 2021.

Schools are urged to:

- Consider if room ventilation especially in classrooms, break rooms and canteens can be improved without causing discomfort.
- Ensure that, wherever possible, doors and windows are open to increase natural ventilation.
- Increase air flow and ventilation weather permitting

The over-arching approach for schools should be to have windows open as fully as possible when classrooms are not in use (e.g. during break-times or lunch-times and also at the end of each school day) and partially open when classrooms are in use. It is worth noting that windows do not need to be open as wide in windy/colder weather in order to achieve the same level of airflow into the classroom. This will assist in managing comfort levels and also heating costs during periods of colder weather.

You will also be aware that the Enhanced Minor Works for Primary Schools Grant Funding issued recently and this is intended to support the operation of schools generally and particularly within a Covid-19 environment, with a specific focus on providing additional support to schools for the implementation of the ventilation guidance published by the Department.

School Equipment

288. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Education if the use of HEPA filters negates the need to have windows open in schools. [4212/22]

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. The updated guidance for schools is also fully in line with the most recent guidance on non-healthcare building ventilation during COVID-19, published by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre November 2021.

The Expert Group note in its own report that very good advice is contained in the Department of Education's Practical Steps for the Deployment of Good Ventilation Practices in Schools.

They also note that it must be emphasised 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. Along with these preventative actions, ventilation further reduces the risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools.

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.

Air cleaning devices are not a substitute for good ventilation but can be considered pending the completion of interventions/works where poor ventilation persists. This is in line with the Expert Group recommendations. Air filtration does not negate the need for natural ventilation and opening windows as required. Furthermore Mike Ryan of the World Health Organisation's Health Emergencies Programme has advised that schools not rely solely on air filters.

Schools that identify inadequate ventilation in a room can utilise their minor work grant or apply for emergency works grant assistance to address ventilation enhancements where the

minor work grant does not cover the full cost of the works required.

Social Welfare Payments

289. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she plans to amend the eligibility criteria for the free fuel allowance scheme in a case in which the income of a person slightly exceeds the allowed threshold and the person has no savings. [3975/22]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Fuel Allowance is a payment of €33.00 per week for 28 weeks (a total of €924 over a full fuel season) from October to April, to 375,000 low-income households, at an estimated cost of €323 million in 2021. The purpose of this payment is to assist these households with their energy costs. The allowance represents a contribution towards the energy costs of a household. It is not intended to meet those costs in full. Only one allowance is paid per household.

In Budget 2022 the Government increased the weekly means threshold for the fuel allowance scheme by €20 to €120 above the appropriate rate of contributory State pension representing a 20% increase in the threshold which enables more people to qualify for this support. The €120 allowable means limit is significantly more than the €33 weekly rate of fuel allowance.

Further changes to the fuel allowance scheme in Budget 2022 included increasing the weekly rate of fuel allowance by €5 to €33 per week, with immediate effect and with effect from September 2022 the reduction of the qualifying period for Jobseeker's and Supplementary Welfare Allowance recipients from 15 to 12 months.

The Government has, therefore, implemented significant improvements through Budget 2022. Any proposal to further increase the allowable means for fuel allowance purposes or any further changes to the eligibility criteria would have to be considered in this context and in the context of the overall policy and budgetary situation.

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

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Tax Credits

290. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will seek an increase in the single parent carers credit; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4007/22]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): If the Deputy is referring to the Single Person Child Carer Credit (SPCCC) this credit does not fall under the remit of my Department. It is a tax credit administered by the Revenue Commissioners and under the remit of my colleague, the Minister for Finance.

The key role of the Department of Social Protection is that of income support. The main income supports to carers provided by my Department include Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit, Domiciliary Care Allowance, and the Carer's Support Grant. Spending on these payments in 2022 is expected to be in excess of €1.5 billion. In acknowledgement of the crucial role that

family carers play in our society I introduced a number of measures as part of Budget 2022 in relation to supports provided by my Department. These include:

- €5 increase in maximum rate of all core weekly payments including carers, which came into effect this month (January).

- €3 increase for qualified child dependants aged 12 and over and €2 for those up to age 12, in all core weekly payments.

- An increase in the Capital/Savings disregard for Carer's Allowance from €20,000 to €50,000 from next June.

- An increase in the weekly income disregard for Carer's Allowance to €350 a week for single carers and to €750 for carers with a spouse/partner, also from June.

- Domiciliary Care Allowance will be paid for children who go into hospital for up to 6 months (formerly 3 months). Carer's Allowance will also continue to be paid in respect of children who go into hospital for 6 months. This came into effect this month (January).

I trust that the Deputy will find this information useful.

Social Welfare Payments

291. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will review an application for carer's allowance in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4036/22]

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

An application was received for CA from the person concerned on 28 September 2021.

It is a condition for receipt of CA that every claimant shall furnish such certificates, documents, information, and evidence as may be required for the purposes of deciding the claim.

Additional information was requested on 1 October 2021 and on 4 November 2021 by a deciding officer, regarding the person's application, financial information, and hours of employment.

The person concerned did not provide documents that were requested. Therefore, her application for CA was disallowed.

The person concerned was notified on 9 December 2021 of this decision, the reason for it and of her right of review and appeal.

On foot of this parliamentary question, the file has been sent for review. If the person concerned has further evidence to support her request for a review, it should be submitted now.

Once the review is complete, the person concerned will be notified directly of the outcome.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Departmental Data

292. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her Department has commissioned any polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies within the remit of her Department for the period 1 January 2021 to date; if so, if she will provide details of the policies; the costs incurred for each individual poll; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4051/22]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department has not commissioned any polling of the general public for the period in question.

As part of our ongoing commitment to customer service and quality assurance, a number of customer satisfaction surveys were conducted during this period and for these an external agency was engaged. The details of the surveys carried out for the period 1 January 2021 to date are as follows:

- Between November 2021 and January 2022 my Department commissioned a **customer survey** targeted at customers of Jobseekers and JobPath. This was a telephone survey and the cost of this survey was **€72,324**.

- During 2021 my Department carried out 3 surveys targeted at **employers**. These were telephone surveys on employer services awareness and usage. The cost of each of these surveys was €14,231.10, with a total cost for the three surveys of **€42,693.30**.

Social Welfare Payments

293. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection when an appropriate illness payment will issue in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4055/22]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department received an application for Illness Benefit from the person concerned on the 15th October 2021. She stated on her application that she wished to make a claim from the 4th March 2021. My Department has not received medical certificates from this date and as such her claim was withdrawn. In order to make an application for Illness Benefit, a person must submit medical certificates from the start of their claim.

While my Department has subsequently received more recent electronic medical certificates from the GP of the person concerned, she has not submitted medical certificates for the period of the 4th March 2021, which is the start date of her claim, to the 1st October 2021. My Department requires medical certificates to be submitted for the full period of her absence from work in order to make a decision on her entitlement to Illness Benefit. If this certification for that period is provided, the Department will consider the application.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Payments

294. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the current waiting time for applications for jobseeker's allowance; the number of persons awaiting a decision; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4072/22]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As of 24th January 2022, there are 3,286 applicants awaiting a decision for Jobseeker's Allowance, with an average waiting time of 13 days. According to our latest data, around 98% of applicants for Jobseeker's Allowance are awarded payment within 6 weeks or less of their claim being registered.

Social Welfare Benefits

295. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the current waiting time for applications for jobseeker's benefit; the number of persons awaiting a decision; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4073/22]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As of 24th January 2022, there are 2,476 applicants awaiting a decision for Jobseeker's Benefit, with an average waiting time of 12 days. According to our latest data, around 96% of applicants for Jobseeker's Benefit are awarded payment within three weeks or less of their claim being registered.

Social Welfare Payments

296. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the current waiting time for applications for carer's allowance; the number of persons awaiting a decision; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4074/22]

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.

The average number of weeks to award new CA applications was 5 weeks at the end of December 2021. There were 1,459 applications awaiting decision at that date.

My Department is committed to providing a quality service to all its customers, ensuring that applications are processed and that decisions on entitlement are made as quickly as possible. There are currently no delays in processing claims once all the necessary information is provided.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Offices

297. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her attention has been drawn to significant difficulties in contacting the Intreo office in Newbridge, County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4075/22]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I am not aware of any difficulties with customers contacting Newbridge Intreo Centre. The current opening hours in the Intreo Centre are 09:15 to 13:00 Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday with a later opening time of 10:30 on a Thursday to allow for staff training. Scheduled appointments are available for customers from 13:00 to 17:00 each day.

Customers can contact Newbridge Intreo Centre in the following ways:

- in person or by post at Moorefield Road, Newbridge, Co Kildare, W12 T257,
- by phone at (045) 491500, or
- by email at Newbridge@welfare.ie.

On-line services are also available through the easy to use online portal www.mywelfare.ie to customers who wish to apply for income supports and / or obtain information on the services provided by my Department.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Departmental Data

298. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his Department has commissioned any polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies within the remit of his Department for the period 1 January 2021 to date; if so, if he will provide details of the policies; the costs incurred for each individual poll; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4038/22]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): My Department is currently collating the information requested and a reply will issue directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Third Level Education

299. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will ensure that all third-level libraries are equipped with devices (details supplied) that read text aloud to assist those with dyslexia or those with sight loss; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4025/22]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The principal funding source for students with disabilities including dyslexia or those with sight loss in further and higher education is the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD). The purpose of the Fund is to provide funding to higher and further education institutions to assist them in offering supports and services to eligible students with disabilities so that they can participate on an equal basis with their peers.

The FSD supports HEIs in providing supports to students with disabilities, including assistive technology i.e. “any item, piece of equipment or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified or customised/custom-built, that is used to increase, maintain or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities”. C Pen readers would be an example of this type of technology available through the FSD. As part of a student’s needs assessment, students can consult with the disability support service in their HEI in relation to the availability and suitability of such supports.

Departmental Data

300. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his Department has commissioned any polling of the general pub-

lic related to possible or existing policies within the remit of his Department for the period 1 January 2021 to date; if so, if he will provide details of the policies; the costs incurred for each individual poll; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4045/22]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): There have been no direct polls undertaken by the Department from 1 January 2021 to date.

Three public consultations were conducted by, or for, my Department in this time period:

- A public consultation was carried out in February 2021 on the reform of the Higher Education Authority Act 1971. A consultation paper was prepared and published on 19 February, 2021 seeking the up to date views of stakeholders. Forty five responses were received to this consultation process and the responses received were considered as part of the further development of the Higher Education Authority legislation. There were no costs incurred.

- A public consultation and online survey of students were carried out in Q2, 2021 to support the review of the National Student Grant Scheme as set out under the current Programme for Government and announced as part of Budget 2021. The costs of this survey are not available as this element of the wider review was not costed separately.

- A public consultation was held in June and July 2021 for the National Research and Innovation Strategy. There were no costs incurred.

Museum Projects

301. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will outline his discussions to date to secure the continued operation of the Science Gallery at Trinity College, Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4140/22]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Since it opened in 2008, the Science Gallery has been a popular visitor attraction and strengthened the appreciation of science especially among young people. My Department and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media remain in contact with the Provost and management at Trinity College Dublin since TCD's initial announcement regarding the Science Gallery.

TCD has made clear that the current model for the Science Gallery is financially unsustainable due to changes in the philanthropic funding environment, which if left unaddressed, would have left the College exposed to significant ongoing financial liabilities.

Public funding continues to be available to support a sustainable model for TCD's public promotion of science. I understand that TCD intends to consult on how their commitment to the public promotion of science might be re-imagined in the future. The Government has indicated that it is willing to engage with Trinity including in relation to funding on the basis of any proposals it brings forward.

Further and Higher Education

302. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science The number of students in further and higher education that

have dropped out during the academic year 2021-2022, by institution and year group, that is, first year, second year, third year and fourth year [4208/22]

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

The key source of statistics on students in higher education is the HEA's student records system (SRS) which records enrolments as at March of every academic year, giving a single point of reference. Therefore data is not available on a national level on students who leave their programme during the course of the academic year. However representatives from the sector have stated that there was no significant difference in the number of deferrals or withdrawals during the COVID-19 pandemic in comparison to previous years.

The HEA publishes reports on progression, which track the proportion of students registered in first year who progress to second year. The latest report, which tracks progression from the 2016/17 academic year to the 2017/18 academic year, reports an overall progression rate of 87%. Analysis of the data, including a breakdown by institution, can be found on the HEA's website at the following link: <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/progression-completion-data/progression1/>

The HEA also publishes data on completion rates - i.e. the proportion of students who start a course in a given year and graduate within the institution they began in. The latest data published relates to students who entered higher education in 2010 and had graduated by the end of the 2017/18 academic year. A range of analyses, including analysis by institution, can be found on the HEA website: hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/progression-completion-data/completion-analysis-200809-200910-201011-entrants/.

Further Education and Training or FET, offers a wide variety of life-long education options including apprenticeships, traineeships, Post Leaving Cert (PLC) courses, community and adult education as well as core literacy and numeracy services. FET courses and programmes are provided through the Education and Training Board network as well as through other local providers including online through SOLAS' eCollege. Courses may start at several different times during the year and may last 4 weeks to 9 months, ranging across the National Framework of Qualifications, and can be accessible during daytime or in the evenings.

The most recent report SOLAS published, using the Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS) database and the Educational Longitudinal Database (ELD) was to examine early leaver learner outcomes for those learners who were enrolled and exited their courses in 2017. This report is available at www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/72dc9680d4/early-leaver-outcomes-report.pdf.

Commercial Rents

303. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Justice if there are caps in place for commercial rent increases. [4168/22]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I can inform the Deputy that there are currently no caps in place for commercial rent increases.

However, it is important to note that for leases entered into on or after 28 February 2010, for the purposes of carrying on a business, Section 132 of the Land and Conveyancing Law Reform Act 2009 prohibited upward only rent reviews and further detailed the applicable rules in this area.

In December 2011, the then Government took the difficult decision not to proceed with the commitment in the Programme for Government to abolish upward only rent reviews in so called “legacy leases”, i.e., those entered into before 28 February 2010. In relation to these so-called “legacy leases”, there was a substantial concern that any legislative scheme involving interference in the contractual relationships of private parties would be unlikely to withstand a Constitutional challenge.

In addition, the Government was advised that any model proposed would require the payment of compensation to landlords whose rights were infringed in order to ensure that the proposal would be compatible with the Constitution and with the European Convention on Human Rights.

The Deputy may also wish to be aware that, in accordance with section 87 of the Property Services (Regulation) Act 2011, the Property Services Regulatory Authority (PSRA) maintains a Commercial Leases Database.

The purpose of the database is to provide transparency in the commercial rental market. It provides a valuable source of information for those about to enter into commercial leases or engage in rent reviews. The database (Commercial Leases Register) is available on the PSRA’s website at:

<https://www.propertypriceregister.ie/website/npsra/pprweb-com.nsf/page/ppr-home-en>.

Legal Aid

304. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Justice the budget allocated to the Legal Aid Board in each of the years 2016 to 2021; the number of legal aid certificates granted by the Legal Aid Board; the number of complaints received by the Legal Aid Board in respect of solicitors operating under legal aid certificates; the number of requests to change solicitor granted by the service in each of the years 2016 to 2021, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4015/22]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Legal Aid Board (“the Board”) is the statutory, independent body responsible for the provision of civil legal aid and advice to persons of modest means in the State, in accordance with the provisions of the Civil Legal Aid Act 1995 (the “Act”) and the Civil Legal Aid Regulations 1996 to 2021. Section 3(3) of the Act provides that the Board shall, subject to the provisions of the Act, be independent in the exercise of its functions. However, to be of assistance to the Deputy I have had enquiries made with the Legal Aid Board on foot of which the following information is provided.

Civil legal aid and advice is provided primarily through a network of law centres by solicitors employed by the Board. There are 34 full-time and 3 part-time law centres. Specific law centres in Dublin, Cork and Galway include an international protection speciality and there are also dedicated units in Dublin dealing with personal injury and/or medical negligence cases and cases involving children at risk. Family mediation services are provided through 10 full-time offices and 10 part-time offices.

The Board also engages private solicitors to supplement the services provided by Board solicitors in certain areas of law on a case-by-case basis, those areas of law being; District Court family law matters, Circuit Court judicial separation and divorce cases, international protection cases, and cases on foot of the Abhaile scheme.

Table A below shows the number of legal aid certificates issued for the years requested by

the Deputy.

Table A

Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
No. Legal Aid Certificates Issued	9,583	11,695	13,418	14,729	11,773	11,933

Under its Customer Care Charter, the Legal Aid Board provides a range of remedies for persons who are in receipt of its services and who are in some way dissatisfied with the service being provided. A person may, for example, submit a change of solicitor request, or may submit a complaint, or both. Table B below provides detail regarding the number of matters raised in respect of solicitors employed directly by the Board providing services through its network of law centres during the years sought by the Deputy.

Table B

Complaints against Law Centre Solicitors	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Complaint	86	112	74	66	76	72
Change of solicitor request	27	19	19	2	29	16
Complaint and change of solicitor request	0	13	27	56	2	21
Total	113	144	120	124	107	109

Table C below provides information on matters raised in respect of members of the Board's private solicitors panel who provided legal advice/and or aid during the years sought by the Deputy. It should be noted that some complaints may have been received in relation to cases that were referred to the private solicitors panels in years prior to the year the complaint was received.

Table C

Complaints against Members of the Private Solicitors Panels	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Complaint	96	22	23	20	15	10
Change of solicitor request	8	123	109	5	30	85
Complaint and change of solicitor request	0	20	31	162	115	76
Total	104	165	163	187	160	171

Finally, with regard to the budget allocated to the Legal Aid Board in the period sought, the position is as outlined in Table D below.

Table D

Year	Total (rounded figure in millions)
2016	€34.8m
2017	€39m
2018	€40.3m
2019	€40.8m
2020	€42.2m
2021	€44.6m

Prison Service

305. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Justice when a response will issue from the management of the Irish Prison Service to a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4023/22]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I can advise the Deputy the Irish Prison Service will respond to the individual concerned by the end of the week, to apologise for the failure to respond to his correspondence and to provide him with a response to the matters which he raised.

Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence

306. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Justice if, in her work to tackle gender-based violence, she will consider allocating additional resources and budget allocations to investigate unsolved murders of women in Ireland from previous years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4024/22]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will agree, resources are fundamental to tackling domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

Budget 2022 has provided an unprecedented allocation of in excess of €2 billion to An Garda Síochána, which includes funding for the recruitment of 800 additional Garda Trainees and 400 Garda staff. This significant investment demonstrates the Government's commitment to increasing the Garda workforce to enable the organisation to keep our communities safe and prevent crime in all its forms.

Separately, Minister O'Gorman has secured an increase of €41m for Tusla under Budget 2022. This includes the budget which will be allocated to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence frontline services.

Also under Budget 2022, some €13m was allocated to my Department to help tackle domestic, sexual and gender-based violence – this was a €5m increase on previous years, and reflects the fact that tackling these crimes and supporting victims is a priority for this Government.

Last November, I confirmed details of 18 organisations to receive funding primarily for regionally based domestic abuse services in an effort to increase these organisations' abilities to support victims, especially given the rise in those seeking help during the pandemic. A total of €445,000 was allocated.

The Deputy will appreciate that the manner in which all Garda investigations are conducted, including unsolved murders, and how resources are deployed are matters for the Garda Com-

missioner and his management team. As Minister, I have no role in this regard.

That said, I am informed that the Serious Crime Review Team (SCRT) continue to review serious cases that remain unsolved. The SCRT is concerned with the review of unresolved historical and current major crime incidents, with the primary aim of assisting in identifying new investigative opportunities in a case.

The SCRT is committed to establishing and identifying new lines of enquiry that might support the lawful cultivation of more evidence with a view, ultimately, to a prosecution. This will invariably involve an assessment of all investigative actions undertaken thus far.

An Garda Síochána

307. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Justice the number of gardaí assigned to each of the stations in Ballymun and Finglas, Dublin disaggregated further by overall number; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4028/22]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, in accordance with the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, which includes decisions on the deployment of personnel among the various Garda Divisions. As Minister, I have no direct role in these matters.

I am assured, however, that Garda management keeps this distribution of resources under continual review in the context of policing priorities and crime trends, to ensure their optimum use. I understand that it is a matter for the Divisional Chief Superintendent to determine the optimum distribution of duties among the personnel available to them, having regard to the profile of each area within the Division and its specific needs.

Budget 2022 has provided an unprecedented allocation of in excess of €2 billion to An Garda Síochána, which includes funding for the recruitment of 800 additional Garda trainees and 400 Garda staff. This significant investment demonstrates the Government's commitment to increasing the Garda workforce to enable the organisation to keep our communities safe, and to preventing crime in all its forms.

The table below, provided to me by the Garda authorities, shows the number of Gardaí attached to the Ballymun Garda Station, DMR North Division, and Finglas Garda Station, DMR West Division, from 2011 to 2021.

Ballymun	Garda	Sergeant	Inspector	Superintendent	Chief Superintendent	Total
2021	113	13	4	2	1	133
2020	116	15	6	2	1	140
2019	116	16	4	2	1	139
2018	107	18	3	2	1	131
2017	93	13	4	2	1	113
2016	93	17	4	2	1	117
2015	97	19	4	3	1	124
2014	88	19	4	2	1	114
2013	94	18	3	2	1	118
2012	96	16	3	2	1	118
2011	91	18	2	1	1	113

Finglas	Garda	Sergeant	Inspector	Superinten- dent	Chief Super- intendent	Total
2021	89	7	2	0	0	98
2020	86	7	2	0	0	95
2019	94	9	1	0	0	104
2018	86	9	1	0	0	96
2017	90	8	1	0	0	99
2016	95	10	1	0	0	106
2015	92	12	2	0	0	106
2014	93	13	2	0	0	108
2013	95	11	2	0	0	108
2012	101	13	3	0	0	117
2011	103	14	3	0	0	120

Departmental Data

308. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Justice if her Department has commissioned any polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies within the remit of her Department for the period 1 January 2021 to date; if so, if she will provide details of the policies; the costs incurred for each individual poll; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4048/22]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): Details of quantitative research carried out by my Department in relation to policies within its remit, in the timeframe specified by the Deputy, are set out in tabular form below.

Topic	Spend (exc. VAT)
Attitudes towards/experiences of the taking of intimate images (to inform the development of a public education campaign relating to the enactment of Coco's Law)	€9,500
Criminal Justice Public Attitude Survey (baseline survey covering general attitudes)	€61,775

Prison Service

309. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice when the findings from the public consultation on the review of prison rules which ended in September 2021 will be published; the timeline for the next steps in the process; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4089/22]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I can advise the Deputy that work is continuing on the review of the Prison Rules 2007. The review is taking account of the updated European Prison Rules, which were published in 2020, and also considering changes within the Irish Prison Service, the prison system and also changes that have occurred within the wider criminal justice system over the past 15 years.

The public consultation phase of the review was completed in September 2021 and the submissions are currently being evaluated. It is intended to publish a summary of the submissions received under the public consultation phase once all submissions have been reviewed and considered.

The initial review phase will be completed by the end of Q1 2022 and this will include completing stakeholder engagement. The policy proposals needed to enable the relevant amendments to Prison Rules 2007 will be developed with a view to then drafting the Statutory Instrument needed to amend the Prison Rules.

Prison Service

310. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice the number of reports that have been submitted to her office by the current Inspector of Prisons; and the number that have been published. [4090/22]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware the Office of the Inspector of Prisons is a statutory body, independent in how it carries out its work, set up under the Prisons Act 2007. The Inspector's key role is to carry out regular inspections of prisons and the Inspector plays a vital role in ensuring effective independent oversight of our prison system.

The current Inspector of Prisons, Ms. Patricia Gilheaney, was appointed in May 2018.

Please see below a breakdown of the number and types of reports submitted to my office, and the numbers published to date from the years 2018 to 2022.

Type of Reports	Submitted to the Minister	Published Reports
Death in Custody Reports	49	43
Thematic Functional Reports*	12	8
Annual Reports	3	3
Strategic Plan	1	1
Governance Documents	3	3
Other Investigation Reports**	1	1
Other reports ***	1	1
Total	71	61

*These include 12 COVID- 19 Thematic Inspection reports and a three day monitoring report of Mountjoy Women's Prison (Dóchas Centre).

**This is a Report by Inspector of Prisons into allegations of wrongdoing in the Irish Prison Service.

*** This is a report on a COVID 19 Staff Survey carried out by the office of the Inspector of Prisons between 30 April and 16 May 2021. The survey sought to gather prison staff experiences of working in prisons during the pandemic.

All such published reports are available on the website of the Office of the Inspector of Prisons.

Furthermore, the Inspector has indicated that she is currently finalising the investigation report carried out under Section 31(2) of the Prisons Act 2007 in relation to matters concerning the Dochas Centre and I expect to receive the final report shortly.

Prison Service

311. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice the proposed timeline on the removal of Covid-19-related restrictions on the prison system. [4091/22]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Irish Prison Service has continued to review and modify Covid-19 restrictions throughout the pandemic.

Restrictive measures have been modified in line with the various announcements made by Government and in line with advice from Public Health/HSE and the Irish Prison Service National Infection Control Team.

In 2021, the unwinding of restrictions was linked to the roll out of the Covid-19 vaccination programme in prisons. As a result of the successful roll out of the programme to all prisons, the Service was able to unwind a significant amount of measures in all locations with the exception of Cloverhill Prison which did not have a critical mass of prisoners vaccinated at the time.

In October 2021, following the latest advice from Government, the Prison Service commenced a significant unwinding of measures in line with similar action taken in the community.

This included:

- the recommencement of physical visits in all locations (except Cloverhill Prison),
- the removal on the restriction preventing the mixing of prisoners from different areas within the prison,
- the return of constructive activities to full capacity,
- the recommencement of prisoner temporary release programmes, and
- the resumption of religious services.

The resumption of these services was contingent on the continuation of a number of infection control measures to ensure the health and safety of both staff/service providers and prisoners.

A number of other restrictions were retained at that time including the continued suspension of non-essential prison visits, the continued suspension of group gatherings including award ceremonies and presentations, the continued need to maintain social distancing and the wearing of face coverings in line with both public health guidance and Government restrictions in place in the community.

The Irish Prison Service introduced a Covid-19 Contingency Plan which is implemented during an outbreak of the virus within a prison. Under this Plan restrictions are introduced to prevent the spread of Covid within the prison and these include the suspension of physical visits, the closure of staff gyms and the introduction of a restricted regime for prisoners in the infected area while mass testing is underway.

The Irish Prison Service has been managing a number of Covid-19 outbreaks in prisons since November 2021 which have resulted in a significant number of prisoners testing positive for the virus.

The Service intends to conduct a further review of remaining restrictions once all outbreaks have been successfully concluded and the unwinding of these measures will be determined by the level of risk posed to prisons at that time.

Prison Service

312. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice the number of prison officers by prison in the State; and the number of those which have CPR training, in tabular form. [4093/22]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): It has not been possible to obtain the information requested by the Deputy in the time permitted. Relevant information has been sought and I will send it to the Deputy directly when it has been compiled.

Prison Service

313. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice the drug rehabilitation services currently offered in each prison. [4094/22]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I can advise the Deputy that the Irish Prison Service have a range of programmes, support services and through-care options for prisoners who wish to address their substance misuse. While drug treatment services are provided in all closed prisons, the same type of programmes are not offered in open prisons as a condition of transfer to an open prison is that the prisoner is drug free.

The Prison Service advise me that It is considered that approximately 70% of prisoners who are committed to custody have addiction issues. It is the policy of the Irish Prison Service that, where a person committed to prison gives a history of opiate use and tests positive for opioids, they are offered a medically assisted, symptomatic detoxification, if clinically indicated.

Patients can, as part of the assessment process, discuss other treatment options with health-care staff; those treatment options may include stabilisation on methadone maintenance for persons who wish to continue on maintenance while in prison, and when they return to the community on release.

I am further informed that the Irish Prison Service engages Merchants Quay Ireland (MQI) to provide a prison-based addiction counselling service. This service includes structured assessments and evidence-based counselling interventions, with clearly-defined treatment plans and goals.

The Merchant Quay Ireland service provides a range of counselling and intervention skills related to substance misuse and dependency. These skills include, motivational interviewing, motivational enhancement therapy, twelve step facilitation programme, cognitive behavioural therapy and harm reduction approaches. Prisoners are offered one to one counselling and group work interventions. Merchants Quay Ireland counsellors work to address presenting issues and to explore the underlying reasons for drug use and how this impacts on the prisoner and wider community.

Family Reunification

314. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Justice if she has considered expanding the terms of the Afghan Family Reunification Programme announced in 2021 to include family members of resettled Afghan refugees who are in danger in Afghanistan at present; if she has considered an application (details supplied) for family reunification; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4108/22]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): In response to the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, I opened the special Afghan Admission Programme for applications on 16 December 2021. Applications will be accepted until 24 February 2022, with up to 500 places available for eligible Afghan family members.

The Programme enables current or former Afghan nationals living legally in Ireland to apply to have certain close family members come to live with them in Ireland. There is no prohibition on a resettled refugee making an application under the Programme, as long as they can meet the requirement of providing accommodation and supports for their family member(s).

As the Deputy will appreciate, no immigration programme can be unlimited in scope, therefore, in line with policy considerations, certain conditions apply. The Programme has been developed to allow as many families as possible the opportunity to have some family members join them here in Ireland. Allowing applicants to nominate larger numbers of family members for admission, would mean that some families would miss out.

At this time, the Government decision is to allow up to 500 places under the Programme. There are no plans for approvals beyond this at this stage. However, developments at EU level may play a role at a later stage.

Furthermore, it is important to note that all current immigration avenues remain open for new applications, including visa and family reunification applications. The Afghan Admission Programme is additional to the current suite of immigration schemes and should not be viewed in isolation. Many people are already availing of these other avenues, and will continue to do so.

While the situation in Afghanistan is dire for everyone, we are all acutely aware that some groups face an even greater risk to their freedoms and safety, most especially women, girls and minorities. This has been well documented by multilateral organisations like the UN and civil society organisations that have been working in Afghanistan for many years.

For this reason, my Department is prioritising these and other groups for admission. Within families, there will be some members that fall into these higher risk categories and others that do not but we will not be breaking up families when considering applications.

My Department has received family reunification applications from the person referred to by the Deputy. These applications have been refused as they do not meet the criteria under Section 56 of the International Protection Act 2015.

Prison Service

315. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Justice if there is a dedicated Houses of the Oireachtas email address for the Irish Prison Service. [4143/22]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I can advise the Deputy that Oireachtas members may raise issues directly with the Irish Prison Service using the following email address - ipsrequests@irishprisons.ie.

Residency Permits

316. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice when the residency position of a person (details supplied) is likely to receive sympathetic treatment; and if she will

make a statement on the matter. [4206/22]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The person referred to by the Deputy is the subject of a Deportation Order made on 1 February 2019. However, they made a request on 23 October 2020, under section 3(11) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), to have that Order revoked and this will be considered as soon as possible.

All applications are examined on a case by case basis, on the documentation supplied and as provided for under Section 3(11) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended). The decision will be that the existing Deportation Order will be either ‘affirmed’ or ‘revoked’.

As a person subject to a Deportation Order, they are legally obliged to comply with any reporting obligations placed on them by the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB) during this time.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility (inisoireachtasmal@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.

Criminal Assets Bureau

317. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Justice the amount of cash seized by the Criminal Assets Bureau in each of the years 2015 to 2021. [4220/22]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, the Criminal Assets Bureau (CAB) is a multi-agency statutory body established under the Criminal Assets Bureau Act 1996. The Bureau’s remit is to target a person’s assets, wherever situated, which derive, or are suspected to derive, directly or indirectly, from criminal conduct. Since its inception, the Bureau has been at the forefront of fighting organised crime in this jurisdiction and disrupting the activities of criminal gangs by depriving them of ill-gotten assets.

The Bureau is widely regarded as a best practice model in the context of combating organised crime. It works closely with law enforcement bodies at national and international levels and continues to relentlessly pursue the illicit proceeds of organised crime activity. The actions of the Bureau send a strong message to criminals and to local communities that profiting from crime will not be tolerated.

The table below sets out the physical cash seized by the Criminal Assets Bureau for the years 2015 up to and including 2021. I am advised that these figures are subject to review and may be revised slightly following updates that may not yet be captured.

Year	EURO	STERLING	OTHER FOREIGN CURRENCY DENOMINATIONS (Polish Zloty, Chinese Yuan, American Dollar, and other)
2015	€315,410		
2016	€571,970	£12,145	

Year	EURO	STERLING	OTHER FOREIGN CURRENCY DENOMINATIONS (Polish Zloty, Chinese Yuan, American Dollar, and other)
2017	€811,356	£31,135	
2018	€373,775	£1,600	
2019	€1,090,925	£24,200	
2020	€1,353,501	£5,690	
2021	€388,594		€2,500 (Approx Euro Value)

Covid-19 Pandemic

318. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health if catering staff and chefs in hospitals and nursing homes will be included in the special Covid-19 recognition payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4005/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Firstly I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all healthcare workers for their efforts during this most challenging period.

In recognition of the efforts of the general public, volunteers and all workers during the COVID-19 pandemic and in remembrance of people who lost their lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on Wednesday 19 January last, the Government announced a once-off public holiday will take place on Friday 18 March 2022.

The Government also announced COVID-19 recognition payment for frontline public sector healthcare workers, to recognise their unique role during the pandemic. The payment of €1,000 will not be subject to income tax, USC, or PRSI. The measure will be ring fenced to staff ordinarily onsite in COVID-19 exposed healthcare environments within the period between 1 March 2020 and 30 June 2021.

Those public sector frontline healthcare workers eligible for the payment will be directly employed public health sector staff working in clinical settings. A pro-rata arrangement will apply for eligible part time staff / equivalents and supernumerary students who were required to perform training in clinical sites.

The Department of Health will also introduce a measure for making a similar payment to staff in private sector nursing homes and hospices that were affected by Covid-19.

I would like to assure the Deputy that work is underway to ensure fairness in the application of this measure as the Government intended. The Department and the HSE are currently engaging in finalising arrangements to give effect to the Government announcement concerning the Recognition Payment. Full particulars, eligibility and terms and conditions that apply to this payment shall be made available shortly. It is important that this measure is applied fairly as intended and I welcome the work that is ongoing to ensure this is so.

There are many, many individuals in our country who did so much during the pandemic. I and the Government is sincerely grateful for this commitment but it is appropriate that these public sector frontline healthcare workers get particular recognition. They exposed themselves to particular COVID-19 risks that did not exist in other work environments or those working

from home. I am also deeply appreciative of all those frontline workers who worked in our nursing homes and hospices during this pandemic and that they also get similar recognition.

Outside of the above recognition, the Government also notes that some private healthcare companies have recognised the work of their employees during the pandemic. I would encourage private healthcare companies that have not already done so to consider appropriate measures to recognise their own frontline workers for their work during this most trying period.

Covid-19 Pandemic

319. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health the reason that general practice nurses have been excluded from the €1,000 payment announced recently; if his attention has been drawn to the significant role they have played (details supplied); if he will include such nurses in the recognition payment that many of their nursing colleagues will rightfully receive; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4076/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Firstly I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all healthcare workers for their efforts during this most challenging period.

In recognition of the efforts of the general public, volunteers and all workers during the COVID-19 pandemic and in remembrance of people who lost their lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on Wednesday 19 January last, the Government announced a once-off public holiday will take place on Friday 18 March 2022.

The Government also announced COVID-19 recognition payment for frontline public sector healthcare workers, to recognise their unique role during the pandemic. The payment of €1,000 will not be subject to income tax, USC, or PRSI. The measure will be ring fenced to staff ordinarily onsite in COVID-19 exposed healthcare environments within the period between 1 March 2020 and 30 June 2021.

Those public sector frontline healthcare workers eligible for the payment will be directly employed public health sector staff working in clinical settings. A pro-rata arrangement will apply for eligible part time staff / equivalents and supernumerary students who were required to perform training in clinical sites.

The Department of Health will also introduce a measure for making a similar payment to staff in private sector nursing homes and hospices that were affected by Covid-19.

I would like to assure the Deputy that work is underway to ensure fairness in the application of this measure as the Government intended. The Department and the HSE are currently engaging in finalising arrangements to give effect to the Government announcement concerning the Recognition Payment. Full particulars, eligibility and terms and conditions that apply to this payment shall be made available shortly. It is important that this measure is applied fairly as intended and I welcome the work that is ongoing to ensure this is so.

There are many, many individuals in our country who did so much during the pandemic. I and the Government is sincerely grateful for this commitment but it is appropriate that these public sector frontline healthcare workers get particular recognition. They exposed themselves to particular COVID-19 risks that did not exist in other work environments or those working from home. I am also deeply appreciative of all those frontline workers who worked in our nursing homes and hospices during this pandemic and that they also get similar recognition.

Outside of the above recognition, the Government also notes that some private healthcare

companies have recognised the work of their employees during the pandemic. I would encourage private healthcare companies that have not already done so to consider appropriate measures to recognise their own frontline workers for their work during this most trying period.

Health Services Staff

320. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the lack of available occupational therapists across the country and in particular in counties Carlow and Kilkenny; and if he will provide further information on accessing support to enable persons to access these services. [4087/22]

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

321. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Health his views on whether public health nurses are carrying out vital work during the pandemic and are public facing; if he made a case to Government for their inclusion in the Covid pandemic bonus payment; if so, the case he made; if not, the reason; and if he plans to pursue the issue via the Government appointed panel. [4106/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Firstly I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all healthcare workers for their efforts during this most challenging period. In recognition of the efforts of the general public, volunteers and all workers during the COVID-19 pandemic and in remembrance of people who lost their lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on Wednesday 19 January last, the Government announced a once-off public holiday will take place on Friday 18 March 2022. The Government also announced COVID-19 recognition payment for frontline public sector healthcare workers, to recognise their unique role during the pandemic. The payment of €1,000 will not be subject to income tax, USC, or PRSI. The measure will be ring fenced to staff ordinarily onsite in COVID-19 exposed healthcare environments within the period between 1 March 2020 and 30 June 2021. Those public sector frontline healthcare workers eligible for the payment will be directly employed public health sector staff working in clinical settings. A pro-rata arrangement will apply for eligible part time staff / equivalents and supernumerary students who were required to perform training in clinical sites. The Department of Health will also introduce a measure for making a similar payment to staff in private sector nursing homes and hospices that were affected by Covid-19.

I would like to assure the Deputy that work is underway to ensure fairness in the application of this measure as the Government intended. The Department and the HSE are currently engaging in finalising arrangements to give effect to the Government announcement concerning the Recognition Payment. Full particulars, eligibility and terms and conditions that apply to this payment shall be made available shortly. It is important that this measure is applied fairly as intended and I welcome the work that is ongoing to ensure this is so. There are many, many individuals in our country who did so much during the pandemic. I and the Government is sincerely grateful for this commitment but it is appropriate that these public sector frontline healthcare workers get particular recognition. They exposed themselves to particular COVID-19 risks that did not exist in other work environments or those working from home. I am also deeply appreciative of all those frontline workers who worked in our nursing homes and hospices during this

pandemic and that they also get similar recognition.

Covid-19 Pandemic

322. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health if he will include catering staff who worked on hospital Covid-19 wards and who had to gown-up, in the scheme to pay front-line workers a bonus of €1,000; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4154/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Firstly I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all healthcare workers for their efforts during this most challenging period.

In recognition of the efforts of the general public, volunteers and all workers during the COVID-19 pandemic and in remembrance of people who lost their lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on Wednesday 19 January last, the Government announced a once-off public holiday will take place on Friday 18 March 2022.

The Government also announced COVID-19 recognition payment for frontline public sector healthcare workers, to recognise their unique role during the pandemic. The payment of €1,000 will not be subject to income tax, USC, or PRSI. The measure will be ring fenced to staff ordinarily onsite in COVID-19 exposed healthcare environments within the period between 1 March 2020 and 30 June 2021.

Those public sector frontline healthcare workers eligible for the payment will be directly employed public health sector staff working in clinical settings. A pro-rata arrangement will apply for eligible part time staff / equivalents and supernumerary students who were required to perform training in clinical sites.

The Department of Health will also introduce a measure for making a similar payment to staff in private sector nursing homes and hospices that were affected by Covid-19.

I would like to assure the Deputy that work is underway to ensure fairness in the application of this measure as the Government intended. The Department and the HSE are currently engaging in finalising arrangements to give effect to the Government announcement concerning the Recognition Payment. Full particulars, eligibility and terms and conditions that apply to this payment shall be made available shortly. It is important that this measure is applied fairly as intended and I welcome the work that is ongoing to ensure this is so.

There are many, many individuals in our country who did so much during the pandemic. I and the Government is sincerely grateful for this commitment but it is appropriate that these public sector frontline healthcare workers get particular recognition. They exposed themselves to particular COVID-19 risks that did not exist in other work environments or those working from home. I am also deeply appreciative of all those frontline workers who worked in our nursing homes and hospices during this pandemic and that they also get similar recognition.

Outside of the above recognition, the Government also notes that some private healthcare companies have recognised the work of their employees during the pandemic. I would encourage private healthcare companies that have not already done so to consider appropriate measures to recognise their own frontline workers for their work during this most trying period.

Health Services Staff

323. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Health if frontline workers in section 39

organisations are eligible for the pandemic bonus payment; and if not, the reason. [4214/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Firstly I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all healthcare workers for their efforts during this most challenging period.

In recognition of the efforts of the general public, volunteers and all workers during the COVID-19 pandemic and in remembrance of people who lost their lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on Wednesday 19 January last, the Government announced a once-off public holiday will take place on Friday 18 March 2022.

The Government also announced COVID-19 recognition payment for frontline public sector healthcare workers, to recognise their unique role during the pandemic. The payment of €1,000 will not be subject to income tax, USC, or PRSI. The measure will be ring fenced to staff ordinarily onsite in COVID-19 exposed healthcare environments within the period between 1 March 2020 and 30 June 2021. Those public sector frontline healthcare workers eligible for the payment will be directly employed public health sector staff working in clinical settings. A pro-rata arrangement will apply for eligible part time staff / equivalents and supernumerary students who were required to perform training in clinical sites.

The Department of Health will also introduce a measure for making a similar payment to staff in private nursing homes and hospices (this covers private, voluntary or section 39 nursing homes and hospices) that were affected by Covid-19.

I would like to assure the Deputy that work is underway to ensure fairness in the application of this measure as the Government intended. The Department and the HSE are currently engaging in finalising arrangements to give effect to the Government announcement concerning the Recognition Payment. Full particulars, eligibility and terms and conditions that apply to this payment shall be made available shortly. It is important that this measure is applied fairly as intended and I welcome the work that is ongoing to ensure this is so.

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Outside of the above recognition, the Government also notes that some private healthcare companies have recognised the work of their employees during the pandemic. I would encourage private healthcare companies that have not already done so to consider appropriate measures to recognise their own frontline workers for their work during this most trying period.

Covid-19 Pandemic

324. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider in relation to the Covid recognition payment including others that have also had to attend work throughout the lockdown periods such as practice nurses to commend them for their outstanding effort and enthusiasm throughout the pandemic. [3976/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Firstly I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all healthcare workers for their efforts during this most challenging period.

In recognition of the efforts of the general public, volunteers and all workers during the

COVID-19 pandemic and in remembrance of people who lost their lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on Wednesday 19 January last, the Government announced a once-off public holiday will take place on Friday 18 March 2022.

The Government also announced COVID-19 recognition payment for frontline public sector healthcare workers, to recognise their unique role during the pandemic. The payment of €1,000 will not be subject to income tax, USC, or PRSI. The measure will be ring fenced to staff ordinarily onsite in COVID-19 exposed healthcare environments within the period between 1 March 2020 and 30 June 2021.

Those public sector frontline healthcare workers eligible for the payment will be directly employed public health sector staff working in clinical settings. A pro-rata arrangement will apply for eligible part time staff / equivalents and supernumerary students who were required to perform training in clinical sites.

The Department of Health will also introduce a measure for making a similar payment to staff in private sector nursing homes and hospices that were affected by Covid-19.

I would like to assure the Deputy that work is underway to ensure fairness in the application of this measure as the Government intended. The Department and the HSE are currently engaging in finalising arrangements to give effect to the Government announcement concerning the Recognition Payment. Full particulars, eligibility and terms and conditions that apply to this payment shall be made available shortly. It is important that this measure is applied fairly as intended and I welcome the work that is ongoing to ensure this is so.

There are many, many individuals in our country who did so much during the pandemic. I and the Government is sincerely grateful for this commitment but it is appropriate that these public sector frontline healthcare workers get particular recognition. They exposed themselves to particular COVID-19 risks that did not exist in other work environments or those working from home. I am also deeply appreciative of all those frontline workers who worked in our nursing homes and hospices during this pandemic and that they also get similar recognition.

Outside of the above recognition, the Government also notes that some private healthcare companies have recognised the work of their employees during the pandemic. I would encourage private healthcare companies that have not already done so to consider appropriate measures to recognise their own frontline workers for their work during this most trying period.

Covid-19 Pandemic

325. Deputy Claire Kerrane asked the Minister for Health if social care workers and homecare workers will receive the special Covid recognition payment of €1,000; if consideration will be given to these workers as part of the panel being established; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3979/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Firstly I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all healthcare workers for their efforts during this most challenging period.

In recognition of the efforts of the general public, volunteers and all workers during the COVID-19 pandemic and in remembrance of people who lost their lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on Wednesday 19 January last, the Government announced a once-off public holiday will take place on Friday 18 March 2022.

The Government also announced COVID-19 recognition payment for frontline public sec-

tor healthcare workers, to recognise their unique role during the pandemic. The payment of €1,000 will not be subject to income tax, USC, or PRSI. The measure will be ring fenced to staff ordinarily onsite in COVID-19 exposed healthcare environments within the period between 1 March 2020 and 30 June 2021.

Those public sector frontline healthcare workers eligible for the payment will be directly employed public health sector staff working in clinical settings. A pro-rata arrangement will apply for eligible part time staff / equivalents and supernumerary students who were required to perform training in clinical sites.

The Department of Health will also introduce a measure for making a similar payment to staff in private sector nursing homes and hospices that were affected by Covid-19.

I would like to assure the Deputy that work is underway to ensure fairness in the application of this measure as the Government intended. The Department and the HSE are currently engaging in finalising arrangements to give effect to the Government announcement concerning the Recognition Payment. Full particulars, eligibility and terms and conditions that apply to this payment shall be made available shortly. It is important that this measure is applied fairly as intended and I welcome the work that is ongoing to ensure this is so.

There are many, many individuals in our country who did so much during the pandemic. I and the Government is sincerely grateful for this commitment but it is appropriate that these public sector frontline healthcare workers get particular recognition. They exposed themselves to particular COVID-19 risks that did not exist in other work environments or those working from home. I am also deeply appreciative of all those frontline workers who worked in our nursing homes and hospices during this pandemic and that they also get similar recognition.

Outside of the above recognition, the Government also notes that some private healthcare companies have recognised the work of their employees during the pandemic. I would encourage private healthcare companies that have not already done so to consider appropriate measures to recognise their own frontline workers for their work during this most trying period.

Health Services Staff

326. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of overtime hours worked on a weekly basis by medical and nursing grade staff in each of the years 2016 to 2021, in tabular form. [3985/22]

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

327. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health if he will urgently consider providing treatment through the National Treatment Purchase Fund in the case of a person (details supplied). [3992/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): With regard to accessing treatment through the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF), the NTPF works with public hospitals, as opposed to with patients directly, to offer and provide the funding for treatment to clinically suitable long waiting patients who are on an inpatient/day case waiting list for surgery, having been referred on to such a list following clinical assessment by a consultant/specialist at an

outpatient clinic.

The key criteria of the NTPF is the prioritisation of the longest waiting patients first. While the NTPF identifies patients eligible for NTPF treatment, it is solely on the basis of their time spent on the Inpatient/Daycase Waiting List. The clinical suitability of the patient to avail of NTPF funded treatment is determined by the public hospital.

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 queries raised, as these are service matters, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Legislative Reviews

328. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Minister for Health the reason that the e-tender for the selection of an independent chair to lead the three-year review was not posted on www.etenders.gov.ie despite his assurances to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health on 8 December 2021 that it would be published in the coming days; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3993/22]

329. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Minister for Health the criteria by which he identified candidates with suitable experience for the position of independent chair of the three-year review of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 and subsequently invited them to apply for the position; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3994/22]

335. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health when he expects the final decision on awarding the tender for the independent chair of the commission to oversee the three-year review of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 will be finalised; the details of the process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4018/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 328, 329 and 335 together.

The Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 was signed into law on 20 December 2018 and commenced on 1 January 2019. Under section 7 of the Act, a review of the operation of the Act must be initiated within three years of the commencement of the Act, i.e., before January 2022.

As I stated during my appearance before the Joint Committee on Health on 8 December, it is my intention to appoint an independent Chair to lead the second phase of the review of the operation of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018.

As the costs involved in contracting an independent Chair to conduct the review were estimated as exceeding €25,000, the legal advice I received was that the Department was obliged under procurement rules to tender for the appointment.

The tender process is currently in train. Given the expertise required for the position, a small number of candidates, identified as having suitable experience, were contacted and invited to apply for the role of independent Chair.

It is my intention that the appointment will be made as soon as possible.

As I have set out previously, the review will comprise a three-part approach to appraise the operation of the Act, with strands focusing on service users, service providers and a public consultation. Independent research commissioned to inform the service user and service provider strands will form key elements of the review. Upon completion, a full report with any necessary recommendations, will be submitted to me as Minister for consideration.

Question No. 329 answered with Question No. 328.

Covid-19 Pandemic

330. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health the entry requirements which are currently in place for persons returning from Northern Ireland as per Covid-19 protocols. [3996/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Travellers to Ireland whose journey originated in Northern Ireland and have not been overseas in the prior 14 days are not obliged to complete a COVID-19 Passenger Locator Form or provide proof of vaccination, recovery or test results upon arrival into Ireland.

The current COVID-19 travel restrictions do apply to travellers arriving from Northern Ireland who have been overseas in the prior 14 days and who are transiting to Ireland via Northern Ireland.

Such travellers to Ireland are subject to the requirements upon entry to Ireland, including showing accepted proof of vaccination, recovery or a negative PCR test result taken within 72 hours prior to arrival. Passengers transiting from overseas to Ireland via Northern Ireland also need to comply with UK requirements, including the UK Passenger Locator Form.

Medical Cards

331. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Health the status of a medical card application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3997/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Vaccination Programme

332. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Health his plans to provide a booster vaccination for 12 to 15 year olds; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3998/22]

362. **Deputy Peadar Kirby** asked the Minister for Health when persons with underlying health conditions aged between 11 and 16 years of age will be offered a Covid-19 vaccine booster; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4137/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 332 and 362 together.

The immunisation programme in Ireland is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The NIAC makes recommendations on vaccination policy to my Department based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international

best practices in relation to immunisation. The NIAC has recommended that a booster dose of an mRNA vaccine (irrespective of whether the primary vaccination course was of an mRNA or adenoviral vector) be offered to those aged 16 years and older with the rollout now underway. The NIAC will continue to examine emerging evidence regarding booster vaccines and will make further recommendations if required.

Hospital Staff

333. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of Consultant Applications Advisory Committee-approved consultant posts across each speciality; the basis on which they are filled as per DIME by discipline and tenure including the number on post-2012 pay rates; the number of each type of contract, that is, A, B and C across specialities filled and or allocated for all posts; the number of posts budgeted for which have yet to be CAAC-approved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4011/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Given its statutory functions concerning consultant posts, I have asked the HSE to reply directly to the Deputy on the issues raised.

General Practitioner Services

334. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health when the free general practitioner care for children under seven years of age announced as part of Budget 2022 will be implemented; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4012/22]

366. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health when he plans to introduce free general practitioner visit cards for children under seven years of age; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4155/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 334 and 366 together.

The Government is committed to increasing access to GP care without charges for children, an important healthcare measure that will remove a potentially prohibitive cost barrier to accessing GP care and will help to improve children's health as they develop. At present all children up to and including the age of 5 are eligible for a GP visit card and therefore GP care without charges. The Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Act 2020 provides, amongst other things, for the phased expansion of GP care without fees to all children aged 12 years and under in three phases: to children aged 6 and 7; to children aged 8 and 9; and to children aged 10, 11 and 12. Budget 2022 provides for the initial stage of this phased expansion, the provision of GP care without fees to all children aged 6 and 7 and my Department has commenced work to roll the service out this year. The specific date for commencing the expansion remains under consideration in light of COVID-19 and the additional pressures the expansion might place on general practice in that context and will require consultation with the IMO, representing General Practitioners. It is important to ensure that any additional pressures placed on general practice will not limit its capacity to meet the needs of all patients in the community.

Question No. 335 answered with Question No. 328.

Health Services Staff

336. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Health if cleaners employed by services contracted to the HSE who worked in medical centres, CAMHS centres and other services throughout the Covid-19 pandemic will be eligible for the bonus healthcare Covid-19 payment. [4027/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Firstly I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all healthcare workers for their efforts during this most challenging period.

In recognition of the efforts of the general public, volunteers and all workers during the COVID-19 pandemic and in remembrance of people who lost their lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on Wednesday 19 January last, the Government announced a once-off public holiday will take place on Friday 18 March 2022.

The Government also announced COVID-19 recognition payment for frontline public sector healthcare workers, to recognise their unique role during the pandemic. The payment of €1,000 will not be subject to income tax, USC, or PRSI. The measure will be ring fenced to staff ordinarily onsite in COVID-19 exposed healthcare environments within the period between 1 March 2020 and 30 June 2021.

Those public sector frontline healthcare workers eligible for the payment will be directly employed public health sector staff working in clinical settings. A pro-rata arrangement will apply for eligible part time staff / equivalents and supernumerary students who were required to perform training in clinical sites.

The Department of Health will also introduce a measure for making a similar payment to staff in private sector nursing homes and hospices that were affected by Covid-19.

I would like to assure the Deputy that work is underway to ensure fairness in the application of this measure as the Government intended. The Department and the HSE are currently engaging in finalising arrangements to give effect to the Government announcement concerning the Recognition Payment. Full particulars, eligibility and terms and conditions that apply to this payment shall be made available shortly. It is important that this measure is applied fairly as intended and I welcome the work that is ongoing to ensure this is so.

There are many, many individuals in our country who did so much during the pandemic. I and the Government is sincerely grateful for this commitment but it is appropriate that these public sector frontline healthcare workers get particular recognition. They exposed themselves to particular COVID-19 risks that did not exist in other work environments or those working from home. I am also deeply appreciative of all those frontline workers who worked in our nursing homes and hospices during this pandemic and that they also get similar recognition.

Outside of the above recognition, the Government also notes that some private healthcare companies have recognised the work of their employees during the pandemic. I would encourage private healthcare companies that have not already done so to consider appropriate measures to recognise their own frontline workers for their work during this most trying period.

Health Services

337. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if all documentation pertaining a person (details supplied) can now be returned to the family in line with previous requests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4034/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a ser-

vice matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Facilities

338. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Health when side B of Abbeyleigh nursing unit will be brought back into use to accommodate the 18 intermediate acute care beds to be overseen by Portlaoise General Hospital. [4035/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Departmental Data

339. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if his Department has commissioned any polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies within the remit of his Department for the period 1 January 2021 to date; if so, if he will provide details of the policies; the costs incurred for each individual poll; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4046/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The information requested by the Deputy is not immediately available. I will survey the Department and the collated replies will be prepared into a full response to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Ministerial Meetings

340. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if he or officials from his Department met with an organisation (details supplied) or any of its representatives during the period 1 January 2021 to date; if so, the purposes of such meetings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4079/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The information requested by the Deputy is not immediately available. I will survey the Department and the collated replies will be prepared into a full response to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Ministerial Meetings

341. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health the number of times that he or his Department officials have engaged with a group (details supplied) from 1 January 2020 to date; the issues that were discussed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4080/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The details of meetings that I or my officials have had with representatives of the Oireachtas All Party Group on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights are as follows:

Meetings with Minister Donnelly

On 8th June 2021, I met with Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee, Senator Mary-Alice Higgins,

Senator Annie Hoey and Holly Cairns TD regarding Abortion Review Legislation.

Meetings with Minister Feighan

Two meetings were held, on 3rd August 2021 and 2nd December 2021, between Minister of State, Frank Feighan, Senators Lorraine Clifford-Lee and Fiona O'Loughlin, supported by officials from the Department of Health, Health and Wellbeing Programme, regarding period poverty.

Matters under discussion included progression of the Free Provision of Period Products Bill, 2021, initial roll-out of period poverty mitigation measures in 2022, and potential for including period poverty modules in representative population Surveys.

Ministerial Meetings

342. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if he or officials from his Department met with an organisation (details supplied) or any of its representatives during the period 1 January 2021 to date; the purposes of such meetings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4056/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The details of meetings that I or my officials have had with representatives of the National Women's Council of Ireland are noted below.

Meetings with Minister Donnelly

I have met with the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCi) on two occasions since January 2021. The details of these meeting are listed below:

- **19 February 2021:** I addressed the Women's Health Taskforce (including members of the NWCi) at the 9th Women's Health Taskforce meeting.

- **1 June 2021:** I met with the NWCi to discuss the review of the operation of Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018.

Meetings with the Women's Health Taskforce

The NWCi is a key partner in ensuring women's voices are represented throughout the work of the Women's Health Taskforce. Representatives from NWCi participate as members of the Taskforce. Details of meetings between the Taskforce and the National Women's Council of Ireland related to this partnership are outlined below

- **20 January 2021:** The NWCi met with the Women's Health Taskforce secretariat to discuss the upcoming 9th Meeting and other work.

- **26 January 2021:** The NWCi met with the Women's Health Taskforce secretariat and MCCP to discuss the radical listening exercise, a large-scale consultation process intended to maximise the participation of women across all life stages.

- **19 February 2021:** The NWCi attended the Women's Health Taskforce 9th Meeting as Taskforce members (assets.gov.ie/129866/97f341ac-305c-4529-b6e0-50e918107278.pdf).

- **26 February 2021:** The NWCi met with the Women's Health Taskforce secretariat to discuss the mental health workstream.

- **9 March 2021:** The NWCI met with the Women's Health Taskforce secretariat and DCEDIY to discuss gender budgeting.
- **7 April 2021:** The NWCI met with the Women's Health Taskforce secretariat to discuss the mental health workstream.
- **14 April 2021:** The NWCI attended the Women's Health Taskforce 10th Meeting as Taskforce members (assets.gov.ie/139697/1deb6456-17b2-4da9-bd9a-4dbb9ed8b27a.pdf).
- **4 June 2021:** The NWCI attended the Women's Health Taskforce 11th Meeting as Taskforce members (assets.gov.ie/139698/d3d85956-e476-497c-b233-cb752830b40a.pdf).
- **1 July 2021:** The NWCI met with the Women's Health Taskforce secretariat to discuss the upcoming 12th Meeting and other work.
- **2 July 2021:** The NWCI attended the Women's Health Taskforce 12th Meeting as Taskforce members. (assets.gov.ie/202445/5b3abfae-b491-45ae-a5f6-1bc109cb2a58.pdf)
- **27 July 2021:** The NWCI attended the Women's Health Taskforce 13th Meeting as Taskforce members. (assets.gov.ie/213852/93adc477-5b83-460d-862f-2c53e9029bc9.pdf)
- **27 August 2021:** The NWCI met with the Women's Health Taskforce secretariat to discuss the upcoming 14th Meeting and other work.
- **7 September 2021:** NWCI met with the Women's Health Taskforce secretariat to discuss their input into the Radical Listening event on September 14
- **14 September 2021:** The NWCI and Women's Health Taskforce co-hosted a Radical Listening Stakeholder Event. (www.gov.ie/en/press-release/171f0-minister-for-health-publishes-report-of-womens-voices-on-womens-health-in-ireland/)
- **15 September 2021:** The NWCI attended the Women's Health Taskforce 14th Meeting as Taskforce members. (assets.gov.ie/213853/b6aa8ea0-84cf-4303-b111-a04a5e8df927.pdf)
- **21 September 2021:** NWCI met with the Women's Health Taskforce secretariat NWCI to introduce new NWCI Women's Health Officer
- **5 October 2021:** NWCI met with the Women's Health Lead to discuss the radical listening exercises with groups of marginalised women prepared by the NWCI.
- **4 November 2021:** The NWCI met with the Women's Health Taskforce secretariat to discuss the upcoming 15th Meeting and other work.
- **5 November 2021:** The NWCI attended the Women's Health Taskforce 15th Meeting as Taskforce members.
- **6 December 2021:** The NWCI met with the Women's Health Taskforce secretariat to discuss the launch of Women's Health Action Plan 2022 and other work.
- **10 January 2022:** The NWCI met with the Women's Health Taskforce secretariat to discuss their upcoming presentation on the findings of their Radical Listening exercise "Improving the health outcomes and experiences of the healthcare system for marginalised women" scheduled for 18th January 2022.
- **18 January 2022:** The NWCI and Women's Health Taskforce co-hosted an event presenting the findings of their Radical Listening exercise "Improving the health outcomes and experiences of the healthcare system for marginalised women" (link to Report)

Legislative Reviews

343. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if he will make available a copy of each the four detailed notes (details supplied) that he committed to provide to members of the Oireachtas Health Committee during its meeting on 8 December 2021 given the wider public interest in the scope and implementation of the three year review. [4057/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy will be aware, I appeared before the Joint Committee on Health on 8 December 2021 to discuss the review of the operation of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018.

My Department is preparing briefing material in relation to a request subsequently received from the Committee, and a response will be issued to the Committee as soon as possible.

Medicinal Products

344. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if there has been a change to the reimbursement status of a drug (details supplied) in respect of the medical card scheme; if so, the reason for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4058/22]

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

345. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider reimbursement for a drug (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4059/22]

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

346. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health the reason that general practice nurses have been excluded from the €1,000 payment announced recently; if his attention has been drawn to the significant role they have played in being the steadfast backbone in health screening, vaccination, disease management, triage and much more in addition to their role in the management of the public health emergency; if he will include such nurses in the recognition payment that many of their nursing colleagues will rightfully receive; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4060/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Firstly I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all healthcare workers for their efforts during this most challenging period.

In recognition of the efforts of the general public, volunteers and all workers during the COVID-19 pandemic and in remembrance of people who lost their lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on Wednesday 19 January last, the Government announced a once-off public holiday will take place on Friday 18 March 2022.

The Government also announced COVID-19 recognition payment for frontline public sec-

tor healthcare workers, to recognise their unique role during the pandemic. The payment of €1,000 will not be subject to income tax, USC, or PRSI. The measure will be ring fenced to staff ordinarily onsite in COVID-19 exposed healthcare environments within the period between 1 March 2020 and 30 June 2021.

Those public sector frontline healthcare workers eligible for the payment will be directly employed public health sector staff working in clinical settings. A pro-rata arrangement will apply for eligible part time staff / equivalents and supernumerary students who were required to perform training in clinical sites.

The Department of Health will also introduce a measure for making a similar payment to staff in private sector nursing homes and hospices that were affected by Covid-19.

I would like to assure the Deputy that work is underway to ensure fairness in the application of this measure as the Government intended. The Department and the HSE are currently engaging in finalising arrangements to give effect to the Government announcement concerning the Recognition Payment. Full particulars, eligibility and terms and conditions that apply to this payment shall be made available shortly. It is important that this measure is applied fairly as intended and I welcome the work that is ongoing to ensure this is so.

There are many, many individuals in our country who did so much during the pandemic. I and the Government is sincerely grateful for this commitment but it is appropriate that these public sector frontline healthcare workers get particular recognition. They exposed themselves to particular COVID-19 risks that did not exist in other work environments or those working from home. I am also deeply appreciative of all those frontline workers who worked in our nursing homes and hospices during this pandemic and that they also get similar recognition.

Outside of the above recognition, the Government also notes that some private healthcare companies have recognised the work of their employees during the pandemic. I would encourage private healthcare companies that have not already done so to consider appropriate measures to recognise their own frontline workers for their work during this most trying period.

Medical Cards

347. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health the current waiting time for applications for a medical card; the number of persons awaiting a decision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4062/22]

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

348. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting on knee replacements in each hospital for 1, 2, 3 and 4 plus years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4063/22]

349. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting on hip replacements in each hospital for 1, 2, 3 and 4 plus years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4064/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 348

and 349 together.

It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. While significant work continues to positively impact on waiting times and improve pathways to elective care, acute hospitals have been impacted by operational challenges arising from surges in cases related to the Delta and Omicron variants.

As part of the response to this the HSE advised all Hospital Groups to take a series of immediate actions which included a period of prioritising unscheduled care, COVID care and urgent time sensitive work - in particular in Model 4 hospitals. Services are beginning to return to normal but elective procedures continue to be affected by staff absences due to Covid and emergency department pressures that are running above 2019 levels.

The HSE has confirmed to the Department that patient safety remains at the centre of all hospital activity and elective care scheduling. To ensure services are provided in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols.

The Department of Health continues to work with the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) to identify ways to improve access to care, including through increased use of private hospitals, funding weekend and evening work in public hospitals, funding “see and treat” services, providing virtual clinics, and increasing capacity in the public hospital system.

In addition, the Department of Health, the HSE and the NTPF are also working on a Multi Annual Waiting List Plan to bring waiting lists in line with Sláintecare targets over the coming years. 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.

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 concerning hip/knee replacements at each hospital in the requested time-bands, is outlined in the attached documents.

Hips

Row Labels	0-12 Mths	12-24 Mths	24-36 Mths	36-48 Mths	SmallVolTb	Grand Total
Beaumont Hospital	13					13
Children's Health Ireland	12	5				17
Connolly Hospital Blanchardstown	16					16
Croom Orthopaedic Hospital	138	5				143

Questions - Written Answers

Row Labels	0-12 Mths	12-24 Mths	24-36 Mths	36-48 Mths	SmallVolTb	Grand Total
Galway University Hospitals	132	23	10		5	170
Kilcreene Regional Orthopaedic Hospital	113					113
Letterkenny University Hospital	41	23	8			72
Mater Misericordiae University Hospital	9					9
Mayo University Hospital	55	17	10	8		90
Midland Regional Hospital Tullamore	56					56
National Orthopaedic Hospital Cappagh	369					369
Our Lady's Hospital Navan	66	10				76
Sligo University Hospital	56	9				65
SmallVol-Hospitals					30	30
South Infirmary Victoria University Hospital	45					45
St. James's Hospital	37	6	7			50
St. Vincent's University Hospital					7	7
Tallaght University Hospital	57	6				63
University Hospital Kerry	76	15	6			97
University Hospital Waterford	11	7				18
Grand Total	1,302	126	41	8	42	1,519

Knees

Row Labels	0-12 Mths	12-24 Mths	24-36 Mths	36-48 Mths	48+ Mths	Small-VolTb	Grand Total
Beaumont Hospital	11						11
Connolly Hospital Blanchardstown	7						7
Croom Orthopaedic Hospital	104	7					111
Galway University Hospitals	59	22	10	6			97
Kilcreene Regional Orthopaedic Hospital	97						97
Letterkenny University Hospital	36	13	17				66
Mater Misericordiae University Hospital	8						8
Mayo University Hospital	24	7	11	5	5		52
Midland Regional Hospital Tullamore	70	6					76
National Orthopaedic Hospital Cappagh	380						380
Our Lady's Hospital Navan	66	8	5				79
Sligo University Hospital	27	8					35
Small Vol-Hospitals						23	23
South Infirmary Victoria University Hospital	57						57
St. James's Hospital	27		9	5			41

Row Labels	0-12 Mths	12-24 Mths	24-36 Mths	36-48 Mths	48+ Mths	Small-VolTb	Grand Total
St. Vincent's University Hospital						6	6
Tallaght University Hospital	43						43
University Hospital Kerry	46	16					62
University Hospital Waterford	7	7				5	19
Grand Total	1,069	94	52	16	5	34	1,270

Question No. 349 answered with Question No. 348.

Disabilities Assessments

350. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health the number of children awaiting an assessment of needs in each county for 1, 2, 3 and 4 plus years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4065/22]

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

351. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the difficulties in getting birth, death and marriage certificates in general and in particular for persons living abroad; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4066/22]

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

352. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if he will request from NPHET the status of its deliberations on and ethical analysis of mandatory vaccinations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4081/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy will be aware, several countries have announced that they are introducing or are considering the introduction of mandatory vaccination policies, either at a population level or more commonly in certain workplace settings. There are no plans currently to introduce such a policy in Ireland. Mandatory vaccination policies represent a considerable interference with individual liberties and autonomy which requires that ethical and legal considerations should be explicitly evaluated and analysed. The

paper being prepared by my Department seeks to explore the complex issues raised by mandatory vaccination as part of the wider, comprehensive, evidence-based strategy for managing the pandemic and will be discussed by the National Public Health Emergency Team in due course.

Covid-19 Pandemic

353. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health the details of the expert advisors invited to attend NPHET meetings as provided for in the NPHET terms of reference; if these expert advisors were paid a fee; if so, the individual and total amounts incurred from February 2020 to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4084/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I wish to advise the Deputy that the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) for COVID-19 is the mechanism for overseeing the health sector response to significant health-based emergencies. It facilitates the sharing of information between the Department of Health and its agencies and provides a forum for agreement as to strategic approaches to such emergencies. It is currently under the Chairmanship of Chief Medical Officer.

The NPHET's membership is multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral in line with best international practice. Membership comprises representatives from across the health and social care service including the Department of Health (DOH), Health Service Executive (HSE), Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC), Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA), Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA) and others with relevant expertise in health and/or other related matters.

On occasion, individuals with specific knowledge and/or expertise have been invited to attend NPHET meetings in accordance with the NPHET's Terms of Reference.

The following people have attended NPHET meetings as on at least one occasion, since its inception:

- Ms Judith Martin – In-Vitro Diagnostics (IVD) Lead, Medical Devices, Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA)

- Ms Niamh O'Beirne - National Lead, Testing and Tracing HSE

- Prof Martin Cormican - Professor of Bacteriology at NUI Galway and Consultant Microbiologist

- Dr David Hanlon - National Clinical Advisor and Group Lead Primary Care, HSE

- Dr Conor Teljeur - Chief Scientist, HIQA

I wish to advise the Deputy that none of the above were paid a fee for their participation.

Medicinal Products

354. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to make the medication for hyperemesis more accessible and free to pregnant women; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4088/22]

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

355. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Health his views on whether home helps and carers have done extraordinary work during the pandemic and have been patient facing at all times; and his views on whether they should be awarded the Covid bonus payment. [4096/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Firstly I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all healthcare workers for their efforts during this most challenging period.

In recognition of the efforts of the general public, volunteers and all workers during the COVID-19 pandemic and in remembrance of people who lost their lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on Wednesday 19 January last, the Government announced a once-off public holiday will take place on Friday 18 March 2022.

The Government also announced COVID-19 recognition payment for frontline public sector healthcare workers, to recognise their unique role during the pandemic. The payment of €1,000 will not be subject to income tax, USC, or PRSI. The measure will be ring fenced to staff ordinarily onsite in COVID-19 exposed healthcare environments within the period between 1 March 2020 and 30 June 2021.

Those public sector frontline healthcare workers eligible for the payment will be directly employed public health sector staff working in clinical settings. A pro-rata arrangement will apply for eligible part time staff / equivalents and supernumerary students who were required to perform training in clinical sites.

The Department of Health will also introduce a measure for making a similar payment to staff in private sector nursing homes and hospices that were affected by Covid-19.

I would like to assure the Deputy that work is underway to ensure fairness in the application of this measure as the Government intended. The Department and the HSE are currently engaging in finalising arrangements to give effect to the Government announcement concerning the Recognition Payment. Full particulars, eligibility and terms and conditions that apply to this payment shall be made available shortly. It is important that this measure is applied fairly as intended and I welcome the work that is ongoing to ensure this is so.

There are many, many individuals in our country who did so much during the pandemic. I and the Government is sincerely grateful for this commitment but it is appropriate that these public sector frontline healthcare workers get particular recognition. They exposed themselves to particular COVID-19 risks that did not exist in other work environments or those working from home. I am also deeply appreciative of all those frontline workers who worked in our nursing homes and hospices during this pandemic and that they also get similar recognition.

Outside of the above recognition, the Government also notes that some private healthcare companies have recognised the work of their employees during the pandemic. I would encourage private healthcare companies that have not already done so to consider appropriate measures to recognise their own frontline workers for their work during this most trying period.

Covid-19 Pandemic

356. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health if general practice nurses will be included in the recognition payment of €1,000 (details supplied). [4103/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Firstly I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all healthcare workers for their efforts during this most challenging period.

In recognition of the efforts of the general public, volunteers and all workers during the COVID-19 pandemic and in remembrance of people who lost their lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on Wednesday 19 January last, the Government announced a once-off public holiday will take place on Friday 18 March 2022.

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Health Services

357. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health the actions his Department and the HSE are taking to support women who suffer from hyperemesis gravidarum (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4114/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Medicinal Products

358. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if cariban which is used to treat hyperemesis gravidarum in pregnant women will be made available under the drugs payment scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4115/22]

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

359. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health the drugs that are available under the drugs payment scheme to treat hyperemesis gravidarum in pregnant women; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4116/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Disabilities Assessments

360. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when the parents of a child (details supplied) can expect to receive an appointment for an assessment of needs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4127/22]

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

361. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if, in the context of the latest easing of Covid-19 restrictions, directives or guidance will be issued by his Department to hospitals on the easing of visitor restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4128/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Guidance relating to visitor access in acute hospitals is developed by HSE AMRIC and published on the HPSC website. This guidance is regularly reviewed and updated, with recent NPHET advice taken into account in guidance reviews.

As the review and implementation of visiting guidance is an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly.

Question No. 362 answered with Question No. 332.

Vaccination Programme

363. **Deputy Peadar Táibín** asked the Minister for Health when and the way that children with underlying health conditions aged between 5 and 11 years of age can avail of a Covid-19 vaccine. [4138/22]

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

364. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Health if the staff in a service (details supplied) will receive the €1,000 bonus payment for frontline healthcare workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4142/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Firstly I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all healthcare workers for their efforts during this most challenging period.

In recognition of the efforts of the general public, volunteers and all workers during the COVID-19 pandemic and in remembrance of people who lost their lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on Wednesday 19 January last, the Government announced a once-off public holiday will take place on Friday 18 March 2022.

The Government also announced COVID-19 recognition payment for frontline public sector healthcare workers, to recognise their unique role during the pandemic. The payment of €1,000 will not be subject to income tax, USC, or PRSI. The measure will be ring fenced to staff ordinarily onsite in COVID-19 exposed healthcare environments within the period between 1 March 2020 and 30 June 2021.

Those public sector frontline healthcare workers eligible for the payment will be directly employed public health sector staff working in clinical settings. A pro-rata arrangement will apply for eligible part time staff / equivalents and supernumerary students who were required to perform training in clinical sites.

The Department of Health will also introduce a measure for making a similar payment to staff in private sector nursing homes and hospices that were affected by Covid-19.

I would like to assure the Deputy that work is underway to ensure fairness in the application of this measure as the Government intended. The Department and the HSE are currently engaging in finalising arrangements to give effect to the Government announcement concerning the Recognition Payment. Full particulars, eligibility and terms and conditions that apply to this payment shall be made available shortly. It is important that this measure is applied fairly as intended and I welcome the work that is ongoing to ensure this is so.

There are many, many individuals in our country who did so much during the pandemic. I and the Government is sincerely grateful for this commitment but it is appropriate that these public sector frontline healthcare workers get particular recognition. They exposed themselves to particular COVID-19 risks that did not exist in other work environments or those working from home. I am also deeply appreciative of all those frontline workers who worked in our nursing homes and hospices during this pandemic and that they also get similar recognition.

Outside of the above recognition, the Government also notes that some private healthcare companies have recognised the work of their employees during the pandemic. I would encourage private healthcare companies that have not already done so to consider appropriate measures to recognise their own frontline workers for their work during this most trying period.

Disability Services

365. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if funding will be provided for an electric chair in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4145/22]

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. 366 answered with Question No. 334.

Hospital Appointments Status

367. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if he will respond to matters raised in a correspondence (details supplied) regarding a medical procedure for a child; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4171/22]

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.

Food Industry

368. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of County Dublin-based producers on the Food Producers Register; and the number of producers in each category as outlined in the registration form, such as, outdoor salad vegetables, indoor salad vegetables and soft fruit in tabular form. [3990/22]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The total number of Dublin-based active Food Business Operators on DAFM's Horticulture Register is **301**. This figure is comprised of **126** registered Food Business Operators producing fruit and vegetables and **176** registered Food Business Operators producing honey (one registered Food Business Operator producing both). A breakdown of the commodities produced is provided in tabular form below.

Commodities	Total No.
Potatoes	54
Outdoor salad	26
Other field (e.g. brassicas, onions, root vegetables etc.)	49
Mushrooms	1
Indoor salad	29
Other protected crops (e.g. herbs, etc.)	19
Soft fruit	11
Top fruit	11
Sprouted Seed	4
Wheatgrass	3
Honey	176

Forestry Sector

369. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of the work being carried out on the matter of roads and thinning of forestry and the

possible exemption from regulatory controls of these matters in the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3999/22]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Last November, as part of Project Woodland, my Department engaged the services of an external body with expertise in legal and environmental legislation to conduct a legal and regulatory review of forestry licensing. This external review is well underway and includes a review of the requirement for legal consent for thinning and forest roads.

The final report is due in February. Along with Minister of State Pippa Hackett, who has overall responsibility for the sector, we are committed to see a continued improvement in the overall forestry licensing area.

Forestry Sector

370. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if all felling licences that are being issued at present are being issued to Coillte with nothing made available to the private sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4000/22]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In 2021, my Department issued 2,877 tree felling licences. Of these, 1,532 were issued to Coillte Teo and the remaining 1,341 issued to private applicants. Since the start of this year, the Department has issued 112 tree felling licences to private applicants and 72 to Coillte.

Departmental Data

371. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department has commissioned any polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies within the remit of his Department for the period 1 January 2021 to date; if so, if he will provide details of the policies; the costs incurred for each individual poll; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4037/22]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The information requested is set out in the attached table

Type of polling undertaken	Proposed/existing policy	Commercial Cost €
A nationally representative, face to face, quota sample of 1,000 adults (aged 16+) was surveyed, representative of the Irish population. The sample was based on CSO Census 2016 figures for gender, age, region and area, as well as AIMRO agreed figures for social class.	This polling was undertaken to help inform the Department in respect of public attitudes to afforestation in Ireland. The outputs of this research will contribute to the development of a new Shared Vision and Forest Strategy for Ireland.	22,635

Type of polling undertaken	Proposed/existing policy	Commercial Cost €
Webinar including questions and polls	Public webinar to facilitate further consultation on the environmental assessment of the draft Agri-Food Strategy to 2030 (later named Food Vision 2030)	4,740
Public Consultation on National Food Ombudsman/regulator or equivalent Office	On the functions to be assigned to a new office as per commitment in the Programme for Government Our Shared Future	Nil
Public Consultation on the Environmental Assessment of the Draft Agri-Food Strategy to 2030	Common Agriculture Policy Strategic Plan 2023-2027	Nil
Public consultation on the draft interventions proposed for Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027	Common Agriculture Policy Strategic Plan 2023-2027	Nil
Public Consultation on draft Scoping Report for the Environmental Assessment of Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027	Common Agriculture Policy Strategic Plan 2023-2027	Nil
Broad Reach Survey on Food Safety and Food Authenticity in Ireland undertaken by Indecon as part of a project being undertaken with the support of the EU Commission as part of the Technical Support Instrument (TSI)	Food Safety and Food Authenticity Strategy	Nil (Funded by the EU Commission)

Agriculture Schemes

372. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason the agriculture appeals office has failed to furnish a date of an oral appeal sought by a farmer (details supplied) since 2016; when this appeal will be considered in full; the reason for such an inordinate delay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4122/22]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): As the Deputy is likely aware, the Agriculture Appeals Office operates independently of my Department.

I have been advised that the records of the Agriculture Appeals Office indicate that an appeal was received from the person named in 2014 and an oral hearing was held in September 2014 in relation to the appeal. A decision on the appeal issued in November 2014.

In December 2016, the person named again submitted an appeal in relation to the matter and the Agriculture Appeals Office replied in January 2017 to inform the appellant that the ap-

peal was invalid. As a result, there are currently no oral hearings outstanding in relation to the person named.

A review of the Appeals Officer's 2014 decision was sought 2017 and I am informed that there has been correspondence between the Office and the appellant's representatives about this request. I am further informed that the Director has recently been in contact with the appellant's representatives to progress the matter. I am assured that every effort will be made to complete the review as soon as possible.

Agriculture Industry

373. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to address the challenges faced by the pig industry particularly the gap between the cost of production and the amount that farmers are paid; if he is considering the ideas put forward arising from the emergency meeting held by representatives of the pig sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4150/22]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Our pig farmers have always been remarkably resilient but I am acutely aware of the challenges they are facing at present.

The average price paid for pigs in Ireland has fallen in recent months, in line with trends across the EU. The 2021 average price was 8.71% lower than that of 2020. As of 16th January, the average grade E pig price came in at 141.02 €/100kg, 9.15% lower than the same week last year. However, this is still well above the EU average price of 132.48€/100kg.

At the recent European Council of Agriculture Ministers, I clearly expressed my concerns in relation to the difficulties facing the Irish pigmeat sector, both in relation to the ongoing impact of increases in fuel, fertiliser, feed and energy prices over recent times which are putting farmer margins under significant pressure, and the sustained nature of the difficulties being experienced on the pigmeat market. I sought the rapid deployment of appropriate solutions on both issues.

I met with members of the IFA Pig Committee last week to discuss concerns. Following this, Minister Heydon and I then met with the main banks to discuss the current challenges in the pigmeat sector and the importance of their ongoing support.

At this meeting I emphasised the importance of the pig sector, its overall resilience and the importance of their support to their customers through the current downturn in the business cycle. The key message was that farmers experiencing cashflow difficulties should engage with the banks as soon as possible to discuss options and that the banks remain committed to supporting their customers in the period ahead.

Separately, Minister Heydon and I, met with the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) to discuss the Brexit Impact Loan Scheme and the COVID- 19 Credit Guarantee Scheme, both of which are financed by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in partnership with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. These finance schemes can be used for working capital finance and include features which address the current financial needs of pig farmers.

Minister Heydon chaired the Pig RoundTable this week and had a further detailed discussion with all stakeholders, including farm organisations and the processing industry, on the issues facing pig farmers. In terms of State supports Bord Bia outlined the significant efforts being made to promote quality assured Irish pigmeat on the domestic and export markets; and

Teagasc outlined the dedicated advisory supports being provided to pig farmers.

My Department will continue to closely monitor the market situation and is examining possible measures to assist in supporting farmers through this significant market disturbance.

Forestry Sector

374. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a person (details supplied) requires a felling licence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4158/22]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The owner of the forestry concerned has been in touch with my Department in relation to removing areas planted under the above-referenced application. The forest owner advised that a plot was to be removed from the claimed area. The debt incurred was notified and has been repaid by the applicant. The area of forest has been amended and will be reflected in future premium payments.

In respect of removing the trees planted in the plot concerned, the Forestry Act, 2014 applies. Therefore a tree felling licence will be required before any tree felling takes place.

Library Services

375. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will ensure that all public libraries are equipped with devices (details supplied) that read text aloud to assist those with dyslexia or those with sight loss; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4026/22]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The provision of a public library service is primarily a matter for local authorities in their capacity as library authorities under the Local Government Act 2001. However, my Department provides funding to supplement investment by local authorities in their library services. Funding is provided as a contribution towards the cost of developing library buildings, technological capacity and other areas of activity that enhance local library services.

In 2019, capital funding of €690,000 was provided by my Department for sensory equipment and facilities in public libraries which were approved in response to a call for proposals to library authorities. The aim of this funding was to improve the library experience and services for children, teens and adults with sensory impairments, additional needs, learning difficulties, those on the Autism spectrum and their parents, guardians and carers. While this Call for Proposals included Assistive Technology such as C-PEN readers, no such readers were sought by the authorities.

In 2021, funding of €200,000 was made available under the Dormant Accounts Fund for a specific Digital Equity and Social Inclusion initiative, which included Assistive Technology, such as C-PEN readers. I understand that a number of local authorities purchased Assistive Technology as a result of this funding, including C-PEN readers.

As part of the Dormant Accounts 2022 Action Plan, a further €150,000 will be made available to library authorities for the Digital Equity and Social Inclusion Programme which will again allow for the purchase of Assistive Technology, such as C-PEN readers. This Call for Proposals will issue to all local authorities shortly and it will be a matter for each authority to

submit their funding proposals to my Department for approval.

After-School Support Services

376. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the grant funding available for afterschool clubs or activities; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4001/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): My Department provides a range of supports to communities and groups nationwide in both urban and rural areas, helping citizens to participate in the development of their communities and providing funding to improve facilities.

The Community Enhancement Programme (CEP) provides small capital grants to community groups and organisations across Ireland, with a focus on areas of disadvantage. Typical projects are the renovation of community centres, disability access projects and purchase of equipment. The 2021 €4.5 m fund is now closed but it is hoped to run the CEP again. It is normally advertised in each Local Authority area by the Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) who administer the grant on behalf of this Department.

In November 2021 my Department launched the Community Activities Fund. This is a €9m fund to support community and voluntary groups impacted by COVID-19. The Fund will support groups, particularly in disadvantaged areas, with their running costs as well as with improvements to their facilities. Groups will also be able to use the funding to carry out necessary repairs and to purchase equipment. Groups should contact the LCDC in their area for further details.

Departmental Data

377. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if her Department has commissioned any polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies within the remit of her Department for the period 1 January 2021 to date; if so, if she will provide details of the policies; the costs incurred for each individual poll; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4050/22]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I can confirm that my Department has not commissioned any polling of the general public related to possible or existing policies within the remit of my Department for the period 1 January 2021 to date.

Rural Schemes

378. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if another round of the Connected Hubs Fund is planned; if so, when the fund will open for applications; the level of funding that will be allocated; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4157/22]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): *Our Rural Future*, Ireland's Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, recognises the potential of remote working hubs as key economic assets for our rural towns and villages. Notwithstanding

the clear benefits to individuals and families in terms of quality of life indicators, remote working from hubs will also support local economies, reduce carbon emissions and may arrest or reverse the depopulation of certain areas.

My Department operates a number of funding schemes that focus on projects supporting remote working through the development of hubs and Broadband Connection Points as long-term, digitally-enabled community assets. To date, my Department has awarded over €100 million to projects involved in developing remote working facilities under programmes such as the Rural Regeneration Development Fund and the Town and Village Renewal.

Last year, I awarded almost €9 million in funding through the Connected Hubs Call to applicants across all regions. This funding allowed for the expansion of existing hub facilities and remote working infrastructure in digital hubs throughout the country.

I am currently reviewing all my Department's funding streams and I will make an announcement shortly on the plans for 2022.