

## Written Answers.

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

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*Questions Nos. 1 to 20, inclusive, answered orally.*

*Questions Nos. 21 to 26, inclusive, resubmitted.*

### Northern Ireland

27. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the priorities of the Shared Island Unit for 2022. [5190/22]

**The Taoiseach:** The Government's Shared Island initiative is working to take up the full potential of the Good Friday Agreement to enhance cooperation and connection on the island, and engage with all communities and traditions to build consensus around a shared future.

We are working on an ambitious and whole of Government basis, and through all-island partnerships, with the Northern Ireland Executive, the UK Government, and with Local Authorities and civil society across the island.

The Government allocated €50m from the Shared Island Fund in 2021, to move ahead with key cross-border investments: new Phases of the Ulster Canal; the Narrow Water Bridge project; and, a major new North/South Research Programme delivered by the Higher Education Authority.

On 9 December, I addressed a Shared Island Forum event, with over 3,500 representatives attending online. I outlined the Government's priority investment and cooperation objectives as part of the Shared Island initiative for the coming year, including:

- Cross-border investment in EV charging networks;
- Developing cross-border engagement on the potential of green hydrogen for road transport;
- Funding for cross-border climate action partnerships;
- Development funding for new cross-border Local Authority investment projects;
- Greater support for civil society engagement on an all-island basis;
- Examining how to enhance student mobility on the island and across Ireland and the UK;
- All-Island Research Centres; and,
- Resourcing to support business growth on a more collaborative cross-border basis.

This is a suite of Shared Island investments and projects that the Government will work through 2022 to deliver, working through partnerships on this island and across these islands.

We are also continuing the Shared Island Dialogue series, to foster deeper civic engagement on how we can work across all communities, in practical meaningful ways, for a shared future. A Dialogue on Tourism was held on 20 January, with participation by the Minister for Tourism, Catherine Martin TD and over 160 tourism sector representatives and stakeholders. A Dialogue on Sport will be held in the coming weeks with participation by the Minister of State for Sport, Jack Chambers TD. In-person and regional events will be convened as part of the series, now that this is possible.

Finally, the Shared Island unit in my Department is progressing a comprehensive research programme - working with the ESRI, National Economic and Social Council, Irish Research Council and other partners - publishing a stream of high-quality work through this year, to inform discussions and engagement by all communities and traditions on the island on the opportunities of our shared future.

### **Official Engagements**

28. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his most recent engagements with the social partners. [4808/22]

**The Taoiseach:** The Government recognises the importance of regular and open engagement with all sectors of society. In recent months I have had a number of engagements with social partners in a variety of different formats.

This includes through mechanisms such as LEEF, the Labour Employer Economic Forum, which engages with representatives of employers and trade unions on economic and employment issues insofar as they affect the Labour Market. The LEEF, which I chair, has met regularly to facilitate discussions with ongoing issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic and our economic recovery. The most recent meeting of the LEEF took place on 28 October 2021 and the next meeting of the LEEF will take place on 3 February 2022.

Other engagements include a series of meetings held last year with representatives from the Environmental Pillar, the Community and Voluntary Pillar, and the Farming and Agriculture Pillar to discuss how social dialogue can be strengthened, as well as issues of concern to those sectors.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

29. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the status of implementation of the required legislation for the national remote working strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5276/22]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The right to request remote work is part of the Government vision to make remote working a permanent feature of Ireland's workforce in a way that can benefit all – economically, socially and environmentally. The commitment to introduce legislation to underpin employees' right to request remote work was made in the national Remote Work Strategy.

On 25 January the Government approved the priority drafting of the Right to Request Remote Work Bill 2021 and the submission of the General Scheme to the Joint Oireachtas Com-

mittee 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.

### **Pension Provisions**

30. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the status of the consultation process as provided for in response to the Industrial Relations (Provisions in Respect of Pension Entitlements of Retired Workers) Bill 2021; if he plans to engage with the network of retired workers organisations on this matter; when this consultation process will take place; the form this consultation process will take; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5280/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** Late in 2021 I did meet with members of the Irish Senior Citizens Parliament who shared with me, and officials from my Department, some of their views on occupational pension schemes.

I intend to launch a public consultation into certain matters raised during consideration of the Industrial Relations (Provisions in Respect of Pension Entitlements of Retired Workers) Bill 2021 in February. This public consultation is open to all sectors and I anticipate input from organisations representing retired workers.

### **Work Permits**

31. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the status of work permits for persons (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5374/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** The Employment Permits Section of my Department inform me that standard applications for Critical Skills Employment Permit for the persons concerned (details supplied) were received on 4 November 2021 and 20 January 2022 respectively.

Applications for employment permits are dealt with in date order. Employment Permits Section are currently processing standard applications received on 13 September 2021.

The Department recommends all applications for an employment permit to be submitted 12 weeks before the proposed start date of an employment. The Department provides regular updates on its website in relation to processing times and advises all employers to take current timelines into account as part of their recruitment plans.

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/](https://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.

*Questions - Written Answers*  
**National Broadband Plan**

32. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the National Broadband Plan roll-out in area (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5196/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** The Question refers to a premises located in the AMBER area on the National Broadband Plan (NBP) High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website [www.broadband.gov.ie](http://www.broadband.gov.ie). The AMBER area represents the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led intervention. I appreciate people's frustration when they are living close to a fibre network owned by a commercial operator, but cannot get a connection to that network, particularly given the heightened importance of connectivity during the Covid-19 pandemic. The NBP will ensure that in all such cases a future proofed high speed broadband network will be built to serve these premises and work to deliver on this is underway.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) that, as of 21 January, almost 294,000 premises have been surveyed or have survey underway, with over 154,000 premises constructed or under construction across all counties. NBI has also advised that premises are connected in 11 counties; Carlow, Cavan, Clare, Cork, Galway, Kerry, Limerick, Louth, Monaghan, Roscommon and Tipperary and over 54,400 premises are available to order and pre-order across 21 counties. In County Meath surveying is complete in the Deployment Areas of Dunboyne/Clonee, Navan and Hill of Down, with over 10,000 premises surveyed and over 3,000 premises under construction to date, with over 2,000 of those premises located in the areas around Bettystown, Julianstown, Duleek and Bellewstown to be completed in H1 2022, as advised by NBI.

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

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

Given the scale and complexity of delivery of the new high speed broadband network under the NBP, I am advised that any dates provided by NBI on its website are based on the best available information at the time and may be subject to change. NBI has recently published details of its full deployment schedule on its website, [www.nbi.ie](http://www.nbi.ie), which enables all premises within the intervention area to have an anticipated service activation date range.

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. As of 21 January, 454 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible sites and the Department of Education for school BCPs. BCP's are connected at Syddan Gaelic Football Club (approx. 6.7km from premises referred to), Drumree GAA Club, Rathkenny Hall, Meath GAA Centre of Excellence, Cormeen Sports Complex, Teach Raithneach Heritage & Cultural Centre, Meath Hill Community Centre, Castletown GAA Club, Boardsmill GAA Club/Community Centre, Kilsyre GAA Club, Moynalty GAA Club, Ballinlough Shop & Former Halfway House Public House, Bective GAA Clubrooms, Cortown GAA Club and Carnaross Mart. Further details can be found at [nbi.ie/bcp-locations/](http://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/).

Kentstown National School, Gaelscoil na Mí, Gaelscoil an Bhradáin Fheasa and Newtown National School have been installed by NBI for educational access. My Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise schools with no high speed broadband, within the Intervention Area, for connection over the term of the NBP. In this regard, an acceleration of this aspect of the National Broadband Plan was announced in December 2020 with an ambition to connect some 679 schools to high speed broadband by the end of 2022, well ahead of the original target delivery timeframes across the NBP fibre program. Further details of schools in scope are available on the NBI website at [nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/](http://nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/).

## Waste Management

33. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will address a matter regarding a waste collection company (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5228/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The electricity and gas retail markets in Ireland operate within a European Union regulatory regime wherein electricity and gas markets are commercial, liberalised, and competitive. Operating within this overall EU framework, responsibility for the regulation of the electricity and gas markets, is solely a matter for the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU), which was assigned responsibility for the regulation of the Irish electricity and gas markets following the enactment of the Electricity Regulation Act (ERA), 1999. I understand from the Deputy that the matter raised in this specific instance has already been submitted to the complaint resolution service offered by CRU. The CRU, as the Deputy will appreciate, is an independent statutory regulator and is accountable for the performance of its functions to the Oireachtas, and not to me as Minister. I have no function in these matters. The Deputy may wish to note that CRU provides a dedicated email address for Oireachtas members, which enables them raise questions on general energy regulatory matters to CRU at [oireachtas@cru.ie](mailto:oireachtas@cru.ie) for timely direct reply.

## National Broadband Plan

34. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications further to Parliamentary Question No. 169 of 19 January 2022, if he will provide the number of completed connections and premises passed in each county and in each month of 2021 under the National Broadband Plan in tabular form given that the question did not receive an adequate response. [5266/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** Further to my reply to Question No 169 on 19 January 2022 (PQ2136/22) and my reply to Question 233 on 1 February 2022 (PQ4495/22), my Department does not have any additional information on the matter since the previous replies.

### **National Postcode System**

35. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of an Eircode application made by a person (details supplied); if he will ensure it is on the list to be released in February 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5272/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Capita Business Support Services Ireland, trading as Eircode, assigns Eircodes to new property addresses using a valid postal address and verified geo-locations. An Post collects information on all new and existing buildings, as well as changes to existing addresses and Ordnance Survey Ireland provides the geo-locations for these buildings. An Post GeoDirectory, a subsidiary company of An Post and Ordnance Survey Ireland, issue a new release of the GeoDirectory database file on a quarterly basis to Eircode in accordance with their licence agreement. Each new postal address assigned an Eircode is published on the free to use Eircode Finder website, a notification letter is issued to the property occupant containing the Eircode of that address and an updated Eircode Database is provided to licenced businesses for their use. Eircode have informed my officials that over 160,000 property addresses have been assigned an Eircode since the launch in 2015. An Post have informed my officials that the individual's address data has been recorded in the latest An Post database which An Post GeoDirectory release to Eircode on a quarterly basis. My officials have requested Eircode to contact and liaise directly with the individual in question regarding the assignment of an Eircode for this new property address.

### **Energy Conservation**

36. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if a person (details supplied) in County Cork is obliged to change their property's heating system from oil to gas in order for essential works to be carried out under the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland. [5335/22]

**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. To date, over 143,000 homes have received free upgrades under the scheme. In the first six months of 2021, the average value of the energy efficiency measures provided per household was approximately €17,100. A range of home energy improvements can be funded under this scheme. The upgrades that are recommended for any given property depend on many factors including age, size, type and condition of the property. Each eligible home is assessed on a case-by-case basis by SEAI's managing agent. This involves a survey of the home which determines the upgrades that can be installed and funded. The home is subsequently allocated to a contractor which carries out a further assessment of the property to confirm the initial recommendation. A programme of work is then agreed between the contractor and SEAI. Decisions in relation to the recommended upgrades made by both SEAI's managing agent and contractors are informed by a technical operations manual

From 1 November 2019, new building standards have applied to major renovations on existing residential dwellings. This means where renovations affecting more than 25% of the surface area of a home (e.g. external wall insulation) are being carried out the energy performance of the whole home must be upgraded to new energy efficiency standards. This means that older heating systems in these homes must be replaced with newer, more efficient models.

My department has contacted SEAI and they have been informed that the works on this home including the heating system upgrade have been agreed with the homeowner and allocated to a contractor and will commence in due course.

### **Mining Industry**

37. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he intends to grant a mining licence for the purpose of mining for gold and silver and other minerals in the hinterland of Thurles, County Tipperary; if so, the rationale for the granting of such a licence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5378/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** No application for a mining licence has been received for this area. I published a public notice of intention to grant a Prospecting Licence in an area near Thurles, County Tipperary on 22 December 2021. A Prospecting Licence (PL) gives the licence holder the right to explore for minerals but not to mine. A PL holder may undertake mineral exploration activities, such as mapping, geophysical and geochemical surveys, and drilling in accordance with Prospecting Licence conditions and environmental legislation.

Seeking permission to mine is a separate process requiring three State authorisations; planning permission from the local county council; a licence from the EPA (Industrial Emissions or Integrated Pollution Control licence); and a State Mining Licence/Lease from the Minister.

The 30 day public consultation on the PL process has concluded and the submissions received as part of this consultation will be considered before I make a decision on whether or not to grant the Prospecting Licence.

### **Transport Policy**

38. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Transport the list of refused applications under the active travel 2022 allocations in Cork city; and the reason for refusal in each case. [5231/22]

**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 responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure, including cycling and walking infrastructure.

Details of individual projects are matters for the NTA and the relevant local authorities; accordingly I have referred your question to the NTA for a more detailed reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 days.

### **Road Projects**

39. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Transport when funding will be made available to progress to phase 3 of the N52 Tullamore Kilbeggan link road scheme in the context of having been identified as a key piece of infrastructure for the economic and development of the wider Tullamore area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5204/22]

**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 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.

Approximately €600 million of exchequer capital funds have been provided for national roads through TII to local authorities in 2022. The 2022 funding allocations are made having regard for the NDP, which balances investment in transport against other priorities of Government, such as housing and health over the lifetime of the Plan. It was necessary to prioritise projects for funding in a manner which seeks to achieve key outcomes in line with the NDP. Resulting from this, while a large majority of the projects under the NDP were issued a funding allocation in 2022, TII were unable to provide an allocation for the N52 Tullamore to Kilbeggan Link Road Scheme. The delivery programme for this project will be kept under review for next year and considered in terms of the overall funding envelope available to TII.

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.

### **Pension Provisions**

40. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Transport if his Ministerial approval has been given for the increase of 2.5% to Dublin Port pensioners; if another Department needs to approve the payment; the timeline for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5292/22]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I wish to confirm to the Deputy that Dublin Port Company, in line with the provision of Dublin Port Superannuation Scheme 1996, has sought my consent and that of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, to a 2.5% increase in pensions in payment and in deferment under the scheme.

That request for consent is being examined in my Department, with the assistance of NewERA. On completion of that review, I will consider the matter in consultation with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

### **National Car Test**

41. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the length of time persons must wait to secure an NCT booking; his plans to clear the backlog; and if he will consider an amnesty for persons who must wait many months for their booking while their car does not have a valid NCT certificate on display. [5460/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** The operation of the National Car Test Service (NCTS) is the statutory responsibility of the Road

Safety Authority. I have therefore referred the question to the Authority for direct reply.

However, I am given to understand that customers seeking test appointments may contact the NCTS directly by calling 01-4135992 or may avail of the waiting list function via the website [www.ncts.ie](http://www.ncts.ie).

I would also advise the Deputy that it is an offence for any person to drive a vehicle on public roads and in public places without a valid NCT. The frequency of testing is set out in the Road Traffic (National Car Test) Regulations 2017 (S.I. No. 415 of 2017) and there are currently no plans to amend this legislation. It is worth noting that the NCT Regulations allow that a car may be tested up to 90 days in advance of the test due date without affecting the expiry date of the certificate issued.

### **Tax Code**

42. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider amendments to the VAT rules for imports from registered UK charities into Ireland (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5185/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that electronic Customs import declarations are now required for all parcels / packages coming from non-EU countries including those coming through the postal system regardless of the value of the goods being sent. Since 1 July 2021, all goods imported to the Union, regardless of their value, are liable to VAT. In addition, all goods valued at €150 or more may be liable to a Customs duty charge.

The Customs value on which Customs duty is calculated is the cost of the goods plus the transport costs (including postage), any insurance fees and any handling charges to deliver the goods to the EU. VAT is calculated on the Customs value, plus any Customs duty applicable. In addition, postal operators and courier businesses may charge an administration fee for the delivery of the goods.

I am advised by Revenue that the VAT rating of goods and services is subject to EU VAT legislation with which Irish VAT law must comply. There is no provision in the EU VAT Directive or in domestic legislation to allow for amendments in how VAT is applied to imports into the EU as this is harmonised throughout the European Union. As a result, Ireland cannot unilaterally alter the provisions relating to VAT on goods imported from the UK.

### **Public Sector Staff**

43. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the way that a person (details supplied) in County Tipperary can obtain consent from his Department to apply for the one person one salary scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5270/22]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The objective of the policy on One Person One Salary (OPOS) is to restrict payment of extra remuneration, from additional public service sources, to public sector employees.

While the initial policy focused on board fees, it has been expanded over time to cover any type of potential second income from a public service source that might accrue to a public sector employee.

Additional payment may be made for undertaking other work in the public sector if certain conditions apply. Sanction for such payments are considered where Departments put a supporting business case forward and where it is established, that each of the following conditions is met:

Where a Department is satisfied that each of the conditions is met, application for sanction should be made to my Department. Such applications are considered and a decision is given by reference to the conditions quoted above.

It is normal practice that such cases are made by a Department based on a business need and not by an individual.

### Television Licence Fee

44. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the number of television licences that have not been paid; the number of legal proceedings initiated by An Post in the past two years; the number of persons charged for non-payment of a television licence; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5283/22]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** An Post act as issuing agent for TV Licence fee collection. The estimated TV Licence evasion rate is 15.2% and while An Post make every effort to bring TV Licence evaders into the licensed pool, a considerable amount of time and resources are spent in dealing with this issue, with prosecution of evaders being a last resort.

Details of legal proceedings initiated by An Post for non-payment of TV Licences in 2020 and 2021 are detailed in the table below.

TV Licence Legal Proceedings 2020 and 2021

Year	Number of Summons applied for	Number of cases brought to court
2020	9,555	4,581*[1]
2021	7,507	4,328

\*The number of cases heard in 2020 does not include 902 cases that were adjourned as Dublin court cases are heard at standalone court sittings and Court Services decided to adjourn all TV Licence cases as they were deemed to be not on the essential list. These cases were adjourned and most were heard in July 2021.

Prosecution for non-payment of TV licences is a matter for the Courts Service. Where a fine is imposed, this is collected by An Garda Síochána. Statistics of fines imposed and non-payment of fines are not provided to An Post or my Department.

### Sports Funding

45. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of an application by a club (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5255/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The Sports Capital and Equipment Programme (SCEP) is

the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country. Over 13,000 projects have now benefited from sports capital funding since 1998, bringing the total allocations in that time to over €1 billion.

On 30 November 2020, Minister Martin and I announced that a new round of the Programme was opening with at least €40 million available to allocate. The original closing date for applications was 12 February 2021 but, in view of difficulties some applicants were encountering as a result of Covid restrictions, this deadline was extended until 1 March 2021. By this closing date, 3,106 applications had been submitted seeking over €200m in funding. This is the highest number of applications ever received.

The scoring system and assessment procedures were finalised and published prior to assessment work commencing and all applications were assessed in accordance with these procedures.

Approximately one thousand of the submitted applications were for 'equipment-only' projects. These applications were assessed first and grants with a total value of €16.6m were announced on 6 August 2021.

In relation to the remaining capital SCEP applications, including one from the club referred to by the Deputy, the initial assessment of all applications is complete. In accordance with our objective of making the whole application process as user-friendly as possible, applicants who did not submit fully correct applications were given a two week period to submit corrected documentation. My Department is now finalising the examination of these revised documents and I expect to announce the final list of successful grants shortly. All unsuccessful applicants will be given the opportunity to appeal the Department's decision and information in this regard will be issued when the grants are announced.

### **Departmental Expenditure**

46. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the amount spent to date on the Galway 2020 project; the amount that was Exchequer funding; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5375/22]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** As of the end of December 2021, €22.7 million had been spent on the delivery of the Galway 2020 European Capital of Culture project. To date, the Department has paid €14 million of the overall €15 million Exchequer commitment to the project and €1 million remains towards Galway 2020 legacy initiatives.

### **Film Industry**

47. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will seek advice and a meeting with officials in her Department to discuss possible funding and support avenues for a local film project (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5459/22]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** Funding grants for film projects in Ireland is provided by Screen Ireland and the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI). Screen Ireland provides funding as the national development agency for Irish film, television and animation. The BAI has a range of funding sup-

ports and initiatives in place for programming relating to Irish culture, heritage and experience under the Broadcasting Funding Scheme. Decisions on funding by Screen Ireland and the BAI are a matter for their respective Boards which are independent of my Department.

### Television Licence Fee

48. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the amount of revenue collected in 2021 in television licence fees; the way the revenue is allocated or spent; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5480/22]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** Licence fee receipts are comprised of direct sales by An Post, who act as my issuing agent under Section 145 of the Broadcasting Act 2009 and a contribution from the Department of Social Protection in respect of free licences issued under the Household Benefits Scheme. Total receipts for 2021 were €220.73m comprising €69.82m in respect of free licences and €150.91m from direct sales of TV licences.

My Department distributes all monies received in the year of receipt in accordance with the Broadcasting Act 2009, which provides for payment to An Post for collection. 7% of the net receipts are allocated to the BAI Broadcasting Fund and the balance to RTÉ.

### Departmental Advertising

49. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the estimated amount spent by his Department on the design, marketing and promotion of materials in relation to the current housing plan and its associated programmes and measures and any other aspect of his Department's activities. [5186/22]

50. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the organisations that were paid fees for the design, marketing and promotion of materials in relation to the current housing plan and its associated programmes and measures and any other aspect of his Department's activities; and the amount that each of the organisations were paid in tabular form. [5187/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 49 and 50 together.

As clarified, the questions relate specifically to the costs of publishing the Housing for All strategy and its subsequent promotion. The costs that my Department incurred to date in this regard are set out in the table below.

Year	Company Name	Description	Amount incl. of VAT
2021	Concept2print	Roll up Banners Design and Delivery	€615.00
2021	Concept2print	Foam Boards Design and Delivery	€307.50

Year	Company Name	Description	Amount incl. of VAT
2021	Concept2print	Graphic Design & Layout of Housing for All publication & Social Media Infographics	€15,510.30
2021	Concept2print	English Version - Print Qty. 100 books	€2,398.50
2021	Concept2print	English Version - Print Qty. 900 books and final editing	€6,959.34
2021	Concept2print	Wall Stand - Launch	€1,439.10
2021	Concept2print	Wall Stand - Launch	€3,025.80
2021	Concept2print	Irish version - Print Qty. 50 books	€2,250.90
2021	CT Ireland	Event management charges	€811.80
2021	Fusion Events	Event management - Launch	€3,690.00
2021	Tom Dwyer	Copywriter Services	€3,000.00
2021	Twitter	Social media promotion of Housing for All-related content	€263.23
2021	Facebook	Social media promotion of Housing for All-related content	€365.41
2021	Maxwell Photography	Photography costs	€362.85
	Total		€40,999.73

*Question No. 50 answered with Question No. 49.*

### **Housing Schemes**

51. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage further to Parliamentary Question No. 308 of 25 January 2022, the total expenditure on homeless Housing Assistance Payments in 2021; and if the expenditure is accounted for in the total Housing Assistance Payment expenditure detailed in the response. [5207/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) is a form of social housing support for people who have a long-term housing need. Any household assessed as eligible for social housing is immediately eligible for HAP and those households must source their own accommodation in the private rental sector.

Under HAP, households at risk of homelessness may be eligible for additional supports. To qualify for specific additional supports available to homeless households, a household must have been determined by the relevant local authority to be homeless within the meaning of sec-

tion 2 of the Housing Act 1988. The operation of local homeless services, including the Place Finder service, is a matter for each local authority.

As reported in Parliamentary Question No. 308 of 25 January 2022 the total expenditure by my Department on the HAP scheme in 2021 was €541.7 million. This figure includes a total expenditure on homeless HAP in 2021 of €28.8 million. Homeless HAP expenditure comprises of rent in advance, deposits and associated costs.

Once a homeless HAP tenancy is set up, the ongoing cost of the tenancy is provided for under the general HAP scheme monthly landlord payments. The costs of homeless HAP tenancies are not differentiated once established.

### **Housing Schemes**

52. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when social housing tenants currently living in previously unsold affordable homes will be allowed to purchase those homes under the tenant purchase scheme given that they were promised in writing at the time of taking up their tenancies. [5210/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I have convened a working group to examine the issues relating to unsold affordable properties. The working group is considering inter alia the scope and options for tenants in local authority owned unsold affordable properties to purchase these properties under the Tenant (Incremental) Purchase Scheme 2016 or other appropriate mechanism. I expect the group to finalise its work and submit its report and recommendations to me later this year.

In the meantime, it remains a matter for each local authority to administer the Tenant (Incremental) Purchase Scheme in line with the statutory provisions underpinning the scheme and in a manner appropriate to its housing requirements.

### **Housing Provision**

53. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the details of the proposed housing delivery by each local authority in each of the years 2022 to 2026 by categories (details supplied) [5222/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Housing for All strategy is the Government's plan to increase the supply of housing to an average of 33,000 per year over the next decade. This includes the delivery of 47,600 new build social homes and 28,500 new affordable homes in the period 2022-2026. Under Housing for All, each local authority was required to prepare a Housing Delivery Action Plan, setting out details of social and affordable housing delivery in the period 2022-2026.

The Affordable Housing Act 2021, the first ever standalone affordable housing legislation was enacted last July, establishing a basis for four new affordable housing measures. These measures will deliver on the Programme for Government commitment to put affordability at the heart of the housing system and prioritise the increased supply of affordable homes through; (1) delivering affordable homes on local authority lands; (2) the introduction of a new form of tenure in Cost Rental; (3) a First Home shared equity scheme; and (4) expanding Part V planning requirements to increase the 10% contribution requirement to 20% and to apply it to cost rental as well as social and affordable housing.

The delivery of affordable housing, in accordance with the schemes set out in the Affordable Housing Act, 2021 and the funding being made available, will be underpinned by local authorities' housing Delivery Action Plans. In drawing up their plans, each local authority assessed the level of demand with affordability constraint in their area based on the Housing Need and Demand Assessment (HNDA) and will plan provision accordingly. My Department is currently liaising with local authorities to finalise affordable housing targets at local authority level for the period 2022-2026.

In September 2021, I issued social housing targets for build and long-term lease to all local authorities for 2022-2026. Details of the targets for each local authority are set out in the table below.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2022-02-02\_pq-53-2-2-22\_en.xlsx">Social Housing</a>]

## Rental Sector

54. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the powers that the Residential Tenancies Board has to protect tenants; and if legislative reforms of the Residential Tenancies Board are being considered. [5236/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Residential Tenancies Acts 2004-2021 regulates the landlord-tenant relationship in the rented residential sector and sets out the rights and obligations of landlords and tenants. The Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) was established as an independent statutory body under the Act to operate a national tenancy registration system and to facilitate the resolution of disputes between landlords and tenants.

Since 1 July 2019, the RTB is empowered under Part 7A – Complaints, Investigations and Sanctions – of the Residential Tenancies Acts to investigate improper conduct by landlords and to impose sanctions, where appropriate. The RTB has the power to impose sanctions if improper conduct by a landlord is found to have occurred, ranging from a formal written caution and/or a fine of up to €15,000 and/or costs up to €15,000.

The powers granted to the RTB since July 2019 has brought about a fundamental change in the operation of the RTB by expanding its regulatory remit. The RTB has set up a dedicated Investigations and Sanctions Unit which includes 15 staff members with a collective experience in conducting civil and criminal investigations in other regulatory and enforcement bodies as well as significant internal knowledge of the RTB and the Residential Tenancies Act.

Following recommendations in the RTB Workforce Plan (2018 – 2021) and engagement with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER), the RTB has received sanction for an additional 41 staff since 2019 to ensure that its enhanced powers and additional legislative provisions are fully implemented and enforced, and to advise my Department on any necessary further reform along with its implementation.

## Housing Provision

55. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the amount spent on social housing leasing from 2011 to 2021, by county in tabular form. [5237/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Social Housing Current Expenditure Programme (SHCEP) supports the delivery of social housing by providing financial support to local authorities for the leasing of houses and apartments.

Details of the amount spent on social housing delivered under the Social Housing Leasing Programme from 2018 to 2021, broken out by Local Authority area, can be found in Table 1 below:

**Table 1: Leasing Spend – 2018 to 2021**

Local Authority	2018	2019	2020	2021
Carlow County Council	754,092	787,285	1,037,396	1,338,934
Cavan County Council	191,831	264,679	293,922	431,522
Clare County Council	2,321,717	2,523,082	2,739,741	3,216,335
Cork City Council	1,657,335	3,235,170	4,082,821	4,735,144
Cork County Council	3,843,349	2,877,463	2,679,292	3,611,429
DLR County Council	2,719,455	1,469,177	3,867,488	4,771,557
Donegal County Council	1,666,096	1,805,224	1,880,770	1,960,896
Dublin City Council	6,828,941	7,792,948	12,013,493	20,534,070
Fingal County Council	5,001,032	6,268,286	7,577,849	10,457,461
Galway City Council	1,747,191	1,701,391	1,574,727	1,697,968
Galway County Council	503,989	539,906	962,363	1,268,181
Kerry County Council	1,933,670	2,406,714	3,023,552	3,560,422
Kildare County Council	1,576,715	1,965,121	2,231,935	5,499,200
Kilkenny County Council	581,158	689,628	919,625	1,209,868
Laois County Council	1,206,889	1,357,036	1,477,489	1,778,305
Leitrim County Council	70,352	83,750	90,048	127,248
Limerick City & County Council	711,497	1,409,179	1,791,069	2,730,984
Longford County Council	573,735	688,209	730,311	999,385

Local Authority	2018	2019	2020	2021
Louth County Council	3,430,079	3,374,329	3,764,594	4,465,845
Mayo County Council	1,020,204	1,323,481	1,830,328	2,378,388
Meath County Council	1,093,794	1,319,144	1,983,642	3,335,657
Monaghan County Council	275,183	343,280	347,255	413,642
Offaly County Council	1,520,764	1,796,437	1,830,852	2,132,782
Roscommon County Council	51,393	146,810	226,982	471,855
Sligo County Council	436,365	529,851	547,422	653,798
South Dublin County Council	6,980,535	7,297,839	8,475,144	11,554,145
Tipperary County Council	2,339,036	2,543,599	2,547,845	2,915,849
Waterford City & County Council	1,429,940	1,807,967	2,413,975	2,569,672
Westmeath County Council	2,003,406	2,403,545	2,761,725	3,308,301
Wexford County Council	1,342,300	1,588,343	1,814,145	2,534,991
Wicklow County Council	381,467	573,817	925,006	1,701,412
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>56,193,510</b>	<b>62,912,690</b>	<b>78,442,806</b>	<b>108,365,246</b>

A breakdown of leasing spend under SHCEP is not available prior to 2018. The values provided in Table 1 above includes Local Authority Leasing from Private Owners, Enhanced Leasing, Rent Availability Agreements, Unsold Affordables, Local Authority Part V Leasing, AHB Private Leasing, MTR (Local Authority & AHB), NARPS (Local Authority & AHB) and RLS (Local Authority & AHB).

### Housing Provision

56. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the housing targets for 2020 and 2021 broken down by new private ownership homes, new cost rental homes, new affordable homes, new private rental homes and new social housing homes; and the housing output for 2020 and 2021 by new private ownership homes, new cost rental homes, new affordable homes, new private rental homes new social housing homes, in tabular form. [5238/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Social housing delivery statistics are published on my Department's on a quarterly basis. The statistics include a breakdown of social housing delivery for each local authority across the various delivery mechanisms. Data for 2020 and 2021 (to end Q3) are available at the following

link: [www.gov.ie/en/collection/6060e-overall-social-housing-provision/](http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/6060e-overall-social-housing-provision/). A total of 7,824 social homes were delivered through build, acquisition and leasing programmes in 2020, with a further 5,187 social homes delivered in the first nine months of 2021. Data for Quarter 4 is being collated and will be published in due course.

In relation to affordable homes for purchase and rent, the provisions of the Affordable Housing Act 2021 establish the basis for two new affordable purchase schemes and a cost rental scheme. The Covid-19 pandemic, and associated closure and restrictions of construction sites, had significant impacts on the anticipated timelines for the delivery for Cost Rental Equity Loan (CREL) and Affordable Housing Fund (AHF, previously known as the Serviced Site Fund (SSF)) supported housing developments. However, 65 Cost Rental Units, supported by CREL were delivered during 2021.

My Department does not hold details on the numbers of new private homes or new private rental homes completed during this period. Data published by the CSO shows that 20,433 new homes were completed in 2021 and 20,526 new homes were completed in 2020.

Increasing the supply of housing across all tenures is a priority for the Government. Housing for All is the Government's plan to increase the supply of housing to an average of 33,000 per year over the next decade. Over 300,000 new homes will be built by the end of 2030, including a projected 90,000 social homes, 36,000 affordable purchase homes and 18,000 cost rental homes. Projected housing output for each of the years 2022 to 2030, and across all tenures, is set on page 32 of the plan, which can be accessed here: [www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/dfc50-housing-for-all/](http://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/dfc50-housing-for-all/).

## **Planning Issues**

57. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will provide planning exemptions for farmers who are trying to develop their businesses in a sustainable way with regard to improving agri-tourism through farming diversification; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5254/22]

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

Articles 6, 7, 8 and 10 and Schedule 2 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as amended (the Regulations), set out various exemptions from the requirement to obtain planning permission.

Under the regulations, the development of a number of types of agricultural buildings and structures are already generally exempt from planning permission. Any such exemptions are subject to compliance with any general restrictions on exemptions set out in the Act or the Regulations and to the specific conditions set out in each class of exempted development in Schedule 2 of the Regulations.

Exemptions from the requirement to obtain planning permission in respect of specific forms of development are provided for when they are considered to be consistent with proper planning and sustainable development.

I have no proposals to further amend the Planning and Development Regulations 2001 in this regard at this point in time.

## Departmental Reports

58. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the reason that his Department's monthly homeless report no longer provides data on single parent family homelessness; and if he will ensure that all future monthly homeless reports include a breakdown of family homelessness by single and two parent families. [5301/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department publishes data on a monthly basis regarding the number of homeless persons accommodated in all forms of emergency accommodation funded and overseen by housing authorities. These reports are based on data provided by housing authorities and are produced through the Pathway Accommodation & Support System (PASS), the single integrated national data information system on State-funded emergency accommodation arrangements overseen by housing authorities. PASS is an active case and bed management and client support system and is administrated by the Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE).

From July 2021, all reports have been run from an updated version of the PASS system. My Department was made aware at the time of an issue that arose as a result of the update. Although the system continues to accurately allow reporting of individuals, families and dependants in emergency accommodation, it is no longer allows for the separation of the number of single parent families from the total number of families. The DRHE has been working actively with the developer of the system to fix this issue. Engagement continues between my Department and the DRHE on this matter, and this data will be restored to the monthly homelessness report after an appropriate fix has been implemented.

## Housing Schemes

59. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the qualifying criteria for the new €30,000 derelict house refurbishment scheme; when the scheme will be open for applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5338/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I refer to the reply to Question No 331 of 1 February, 2022 which sets out the current position on this matter.

## Planning Issues

60. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will extend article 10(6) an exemption change of use from commercial to residential; if the classes that qualify for the exemption will be expanded upon; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5369/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** The Planning and Development (Amendment) (No.2) Regulations 2018, which came into operation on 8 February 2018, provide for an exemption from the requirement to obtain planning permission in respect of the change of use of certain vacant commercial premises to residential use, including the conversion of vacant areas above ground floor commercial premises to residential use. This measure was aimed at facilitating the productive re-use of qualifying vacant commercial buildings as homes, while also facilitating urban renewal and

the bringing on stream of increased housing supply. The original expiry date of the Regulations was 31 December 2021 which was subsequently extended to 25 February 2022 arising from the Covid-related shutdown of the planning system for 8 weeks during the period March to May 2020, which extended all planning timelines by 8 weeks.

The Government's plan for housing - Housing for All commits to reviewing and extending the 2018 regulations to the end of 2025.

Under section 262(4) of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, legislative proposals in relation to exempted development require the approval of both Houses of the Oireachtas before they can be signed into law. It is intended to submit draft regulations in this regard to the Oireachtas for approval shortly.

### **Local Authorities**

61. **Deputy Patrick O'Donovan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if there is a requirement on the CEO of a local authority to respond to a person who makes a submission to a Draft County Development Plan on receipt of same; and if so, the time-frame for same. [5461/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** Pursuant to Section 11(1)(a) of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended (the Act), not later than 4 years after the making of a development plan, a planning authority shall give notice of its intention to review its existing development plan and to prepare a new development plan for its area. As part of each stage of the review, there is a clear and structured approach governing the public consultation processes, specifying the role of the executive and the role of the elected members.

As provided for under Section 12(1) of the Act, any written submissions or observations with respect to the draft development plan which are made to the planning authority within the period stated in the notice (which must be not less than 10 weeks), must be taken into account before the making of the plan.

Section 12(4) of the Act sets out the procedures and timeframes for dealing with submissions and the preparation of a report by a Chief Executive of a planning authority. Within 22 weeks of publication of notice of public display of the draft development plan, the Chief Executive must prepare a report on all submissions or observations received on the draft development plan, and must submit this report to the elected members for their consideration. A Chief Executive's report must be published on the website of the planning authority concerned as soon as practicable following submission to the members of the authority.

In accordance with the Act, the Chief Executive's report must list the persons or bodies who made submissions or observations and provide a summary of:

(i) the recommendations, submissions and observations made by the Office of the Planning Regulator;

(ii) the submissions and observations made by any other persons, in relation to the draft development plan;

(iii) give the response of the Chief Executive to the issues raised, taking account of

- any directions of the members given in relation to the draft development plan prior to

publication, or the committee under section 11(4) of the Act;

- the proper planning and sustainable development of the area;
- the statutory obligations of any local authority in the area; and
- any relevant policies or objectives of the Government or of any Minister of the Government; and,
- if appropriate, any observations made by the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in relation to protected structures under Section 12(3)(b)(iv).

As such, the Chief Executive must respond in the Chief Executive's report, to the issues raised by all persons, taking account of the relevant planning considerations, within 22 weeks of giving notice of public display of a draft development plan.

The elected members of the planning authority then have a further 12 weeks to consider the Chief Executive's Report and to determine whether the draft development plan may be adopted, or whether it is necessary to propose further material amendment to the draft development plan, which must then be further displayed in public for submissions or observations, prior to final adoption of the plan.

### **Defective Building Materials**

**62. Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if there is a support available for persons with a lack of means to pay for testing their homes which are potentially affected by MICA or pyrite given that it is causing a lot of worry stress to these homeowners; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5482/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I brought a Memorandum to Government on an enhanced Defective Concrete Blocks Grant Scheme on 30 November 2021 and it included an unprecedented suite of improvements to the current scheme. Government approved the enhanced scheme which it is estimated will cost approximately €2.2Bn. The comprehensive changes include:

- The current 90% maximum grant will be increased to a 100% grant for all remediation options 1-5.

- The maximum grant cap for option 1 (demolition and rebuild) will be increased from €247,500 to €420,000.

- The grant calculation methodology in respect of option 1 remediation will be based on a cost per square foot with costings to be set by my Department in consultation with the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland (SCSI). An indicative rate of €145 per square foot for the first 1,000 sq foot with a sliding scale thereafter has been announced by my Department and this will be subject to review as required in line with construction cost changes. In the case of remediation options 2-5 a similar but necessarily different approach will be taken to inform the appropriate rate for blockwork removal and replacement following consultation with SCSI.

- A revised application process will be introduced which will only require the homeowner to submit an initial 'Building Condition Assessment' at minimal cost recoupable on entry to the Scheme. The Housing Agency will take over testing, sampling and categorisation of homes on behalf of homeowners and local authorities and will thereafter recommend the appropriate remediation option and grant amount for each home.

- Alternative accommodation and storage costs are to be included, subject to a maximum of €20,000.

- €5,000 will be available for essential immediate repair works recommended by a building professional as part of the Building Condition Assessment process.

- In relation to works carried out under remediation options 2-5, a second grant option, will be available for such a home in the future if blockwork which was not removed as part of the initial remediation work subsequently proves defective in accordance with the IS:465 standard.  
- A new independent appeals process will be introduced.

- The Scheme will be extended beyond the current scope of Principal Private Residences only, to also cover Residential Tenancies Board registered rental properties, subject to the introduction of a clawback mechanism upon re-sale within a set time period depending on the remediation option used. Opportunities for the State to acquire such rental properties for social housing purposes will also be examined.

Full details in relation to the changes announced are available at the following link;

[www.gov.ie/en/press-release/e365e-minister-obrien-announces-enhancements-to-the-defective-concrete-block-scheme/](http://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/e365e-minister-obrien-announces-enhancements-to-the-defective-concrete-block-scheme/)

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.

In the immediate term I am making amendments to the Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks in Construction (Remediation) (Financial Assistance) Regulations 2020 which will allow for the recoupment of Engineer fees to homeowners who have applied for entry into the scheme. Furthermore, as part of these amended regulations, €5,000 will be recoupable as an allowable cost under the scheme for essential immediate repair works which are deemed necessary by a homeowners engineer under a Building Condition Assessment report.

## **Diplomatic Representation**

63. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the correspondence or meetings he has had with the Russian Ambassador in relation to naval exercises conducted by the Russian military off of the Irish coast. [5242/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Last week, following extensive engagement with the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Dublin, I wrote to the Minister of Defence of Russia, Sergey Shoygu, to request a reconsideration of the planned Russian naval exercises off the Irish coast. Officials from my Department, including the Secretary General of the Department of Foreign Affairs, also held several additional discussions with the Russian Ambassador in this regard.

In the course of this engagement with the Russian authorities, I raised a number of concerns in relation to the naval exercises, in particular in the context of the current political and security environment in Europe. I also drew attention to the concerns of the Government and other stakeholders in respect of the potential impact on fisheries and on other marine life in the area of the planned exercises.

On 29 January, I received a response from Minister Shoygu, confirming that the exercise will be relocated outside of Ireland's Exclusive Economic Zone. I have welcomed this response.

More broadly, Ireland remains concerned at the wider security situation in Europe. Together with our EU partners, our focus remains very much on diplomacy and de-escalation and the ongoing efforts in this regard.

### Northern Ireland

64. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the heads of state with whom he has raised the British amnesty for crimes by British service members during the Troubles; the response of each respective head of state; and the further actions he plans to take to garner international support against the amnesty. [5243/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Government has made clear that a Statute of Limitations with respect to Troubles-related offenses, as proposed in the UK Government's command paper last July, is not something we could support. It has been opposed by all parties in Northern Ireland, and, crucially, by victims and survivors. We have also cautioned very strongly against unilateral action by the UK Government in this most sensitive space.

The Taoiseach has conveyed these concerns to Prime Minister Johnson, and at every available opportunity I have underlined this message to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

In engagements with my EU counterparts, I have made clear the Government's position when I update them on the latest developments with respect to Northern Ireland. We have also been very clear in our interventions in the Council of Europe that 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. I would note that the UN Special Rapporteur has expressed their grave concerns with regard to the UK's proposals, as has the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights.

We have also been engaging with US contacts in the Administration and Congress on this issue. We have made clear that the proposal for a Statute of Limitations is not one that we could support.

In 2014, together with the UK Government and the parties in Northern Ireland, we reached the Stormont House Agreement which provided for a balanced and comprehensive framework to address the legacy of the past. We have consistently said that we are ready to engage with concerns or issues to do with the implementation of the Stormont House agreement but any such changes must be discussed and agreed by the parties and both Governments. It is vital that any approach is collective if it is to work, and crucially, that it meets both the needs of victims and our shared international human rights obligations.

### Northern Ireland

65. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has raised with any British government official the issue of British collusion with loyalist paramilitaries and barriers to investigating that collusion imposed by British security authorities; and if so, the officials he raised it with. [5244/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I have consistently raised the need to comprehensively address the legacy of the past with the British Government, including at the British-Irish Inter-Governmental Conference, the latest of which took place in London

on 2 December. I am in regular contact with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, with the party leaders in Northern Ireland, and with victims and civil society organisations as we continue to press for progress on this issue.

The Government agreed to take part, together with the UK Government and the Northern Ireland parties, in a legacy engagement process which began in July last year, with the aim of finding a collective way forward on these issues. We also continue to raise individual legacy cases and the urgent need for access to information, including with respect to the Dublin-Monaghan bombings and the murder of Pat Finucane.

The Government has of course noted the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland's report into 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. This is an important report and we are studying it carefully.

The publication of this report was undoubtedly a significant and emotional moment for the families who lost loved ones as a result of this violence, and indeed for all families across the island who have shared that terrible experience and have had to campaign for decades to access the truth. It has been the consistent position of the Government that all families deserve access to information and a process of justice for their loved one, regardless of the perpetrator. Too many families have been waiting for too long.

A comprehensive legacy framework, as we set out in the Stormont House Agreement, is urgently needed. 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 make clear that a Statute of Limitations is not an approach we could support, and 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. The rule of law and the protections afforded by the European Convention on Human Rights must apply equally to everyone and must be upheld.

## **European Union**

66. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on the call by the President of France to include abortion in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. [5245/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Coinciding with the beginning of the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the President of France set out an overview of his views on a range of issues in a speech to the European Parliament in January. In a wide-ranging address, President Macron expressed a view that the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights should be updated so as to be more explicit about certain issues including “environmental protection and recognition of the right to abortion”.

The provisions of the Charter of Fundamental Rights are addressed to the Member States only when they are implementing EU law. Naturally, any proposed amendments to the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights would require very extensive consideration and debate and would need the agreement of all Member States. As no concrete proposals are in place, the Government has not yet given this matter consideration. Furthermore, the Department of Health is the

lead Department in respect of Ireland's policy on sexual and reproductive health rights.

### United Nations

67. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the amount of funding provided by Ireland in 2020 and 2021 to the United Nations broken down by UN body and committee, to international organisations by body or committee and in foreign aid by country in tabular form. [5246/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy):** In line with *A Better World*, Ireland's international development policy, 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 in partner countries amongst others. As part of Ireland's membership of the EU Ireland also contributes to EU development efforts.

Details of funding for 2020 to the EU, multilateral organisations, including UN Agencies Funds and Programmes, and the top thirty recipients of bilateral funding from Ireland, are set out below.

My Department publishes an annual report on Ireland's ODA programme, also known as Irish Aid, each year, detailing the totality of spend across Government on international development - approximately 60 percent of Ireland's total ODA is administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs with the balance administered through other Departments. The annual report includes a series of annexes detailing statistical information collated in accordance with agreed OECD standards on programme expenditure which show the distribution of aid, the amounts allocated to 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.

#### Funding to the EU and to Multilateral Organisations 2020

	€000s
European Union Institutions	230,106
UN Agencies Fund or Commission	198,282
Other Multilateral Institutions	40,209
World Bank Group	39,202
Regional Development Banks	23,281
World Trade Organisation	1,700
Grand Total	532,780

#### Top 30 Recipient Countries of Ireland's Bilateral ODA 2020\*

Ethiopia	39,677
Mozambique	25,784
Tanzania	22,901
Uganda	22,762
Malawi	20,844
Sierra Leone	14,626

Zimbabwe	8,771
Palestine	8,619
South Sudan	8,606
Kenya	8,060
Vietnam	7,539
Democratic Republic of the Congo	7,155
Syrian Arab Republic	6,771
Somalia	6,727
Sudan	6,142
Yemen	6,027
Zambia	5,718
Turkey	5,533
Central African Republic	5,037
Liberia	4,696
South Africa	4,622
Jordan	3,908
Lebanon	3,771
Niger	3,481
Afghanistan	2,779
Colombia	2,439
Bangladesh	2,290
Myanmar	2,263
Chad	2,248
Rwanda	1,891

\*In the case of countries with major humanitarian crises, funding may be allocated to neighbouring countries or on a non-country specific basis. Figures for Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan include support to the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Diplomatic Representation

68. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if there are plans to expand the embassy network in Africa in the context of the Global Ireland Strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5268/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy):** The Global Ireland initiative was launched in 2018 with the aim of doubling Ireland's impact, including the expansion of Ireland's global footprint. An early step in taking forward the ambition of the Global Ireland Initiative, was the upgrading in 2018 of the Irish Aid office in Monrovia, Liberia, to Embassy status.

Building on Ireland's longstanding engagement with Africa, and as part of the Global Ireland initiative, a new Government of Ireland Africa Strategy was launched in November 2019. The Strategy covers all countries on the African continent in a single strategic approach engaging political, economic, cultural, and development relations.

The Africa Strategy also sets out the framework for Ireland's expanded presence in Africa, including a number of new Embassies in North and West Africa by 2025, in parallel with a deepening of existing strong relationships across the continent. As part of the Strategy a new

Embassy was opened in Rabat, Morocco, during 2021, bringing the current total number of Ireland's Embassies across the African continent up to thirteen, and providing an opportunity for Ireland to build our visibility in Morocco and the wider region including through the Embassy's secondary accreditations.

Also in 2021, the Government announced its intention to open a new Embassy in Dakar, Senegal, if possible by the end of 2022. Ireland's new Embassy in Dakar will enhance Ireland's bilateral relations with Senegal and significantly contribute towards the advancing of Ireland's strategic interests in francophone West Africa and the Sahel. In particular, the new Embassy will support accessing the significant potential that the region holds for Irish trade in goods and services and will act as a platform for a deepening of the Irish Aid programme in the Central Sahel, including through secondary accreditations.

The question of the further enhancement of Ireland's footprint in Africa, will be determined in the context of delivering on the next elements of the Global Ireland Initiative and the needs of a growing international development programme.

### **Diplomatic Representation**

69. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when he expects the new Ireland House Irish Embassy to open in Tokyo; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5269/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** As part of the Government's Global Ireland 2025 initiative, Ireland is investing in a new, state-of-the-art Ireland House in Tokyo. Construction is expected to take two years and is scheduled to commence within the next twelve months.

Japan is an important and like minded partner for Ireland. As the third largest economy in the world, Japan is a vital market for Irish goods and services and an important source of foreign direct investment. The new Ireland House will be a symbol of Ireland's commitment to its relationship with Japan and our ambition to develop this further.

The vision for this new 'Ireland House' building is to provide an exceptional platform for Ireland to deepen our engagement in Japan in future years. In addition, the new building will help raise Ireland's profile in Japan and showcase our cultural heritage, creativity and innovation through excellence in design. The building will meet the highest sustainability standards.

Located in Yotsuya district in central Tokyo, Ireland House will be home to offices for the Embassy and the State Agencies and the official accommodation of the Ambassador. The building will also house a multi-use event and exhibition space for culture, promotion and business and will be a meeting place for the Irish community in Japan.

An international Design Competition was held to identify a design for the architects for the building, with Dublin based architects firm Henry J Lyons announced as the winning team in September 2020.

### **Patent Applications**

70. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when a passport will issue in the case of persons (details supplied) whose applications were submitted via post a number of months ago; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5367/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The processing of Foreign Birth Registration has resumed and will be gradually scaling up in line with the recruitment of additional resources. Due to the complex nature of the Foreign Birth Registration process, 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.

The applications referenced were registered on 26 February 2020, and will be processed in the near future. A member of the FBR team will be in contact with the applicants shortly in this regard.

My Department is fully committed to the continued allocation of additional resources over the coming period to assist with the processing of the Foreign Birth Registration applications currently on hand and the high volume of new applications anticipated this year.

### **Patent Applications**

71. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when a passport will be processed for a person (details supplied) in County Donegal; if a passport submitted in July 2021 with the application can be used as supporting evidence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5372/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Passport Service does not currently have the documentation required to process this application to passport issue as these documents were returned to the applicant's parents in error.

The Passport Service has contacted the applicant's parents to apologise for this error and the inconvenience it has caused. They have been advised to resubmit the required documents to the Passport Service. Once these documents are received, the application will be prioritised for immediate passport entitlement checking.

### **Passport Services**

72. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of times the online passport service has gone down in each of the past 12 months; the number of complaints that have been received as a result; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5373/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Passport Online service offers Irish citizens the ability to apply online for their passport 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It is a user-friendly, efficient service that consistently offers processing times up to 4 times faster than paper-based passport renewal applications. 90% of all passport applications are received through Passport Online.

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

The Passport Online service was temporarily offline due to technical difficulties on four

dates over the past year.

The Passport Service regrets that Passport Online experienced technical issues last week. Despite these issues, over 32,000 applications were submitted via Passport Online last week.

A scheduled system upgrade that will improve the responsiveness and efficiency of the system was completed on Friday, January 28th. This upgrade has addressed the issues experienced by some customers. Since the upgrade was completed, Passport Online has been fully functional and operating smoothly.

The Passport Service ensures that customers are fully informed of any scheduled downtime or technical issues with Passport Online via its social media accounts and on the Passport Online website.

The Passport Service has no record of any official complaints regarding Passport Online downtime over the past 12 months. The Customer Service Hub did experience an increase in calls and webchat enquiries as a result of the intermittent downtime last week and the Customer Service team advised all enquirers of the temporary nature of the issue.

### Patent Applications

73. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when a passport will be provided for a child (details supplied) in Dublin 9; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5478/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** With regard to the specific application about which the Deputy has enquired, the Passport Service has contacted the applicant's parent and advised them on the status of their application.

### Defence Forces

74. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence the maximum and the current strength levels of the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5214/22]

75. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence the maximum and the current strength levels of the Naval Service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5215/22]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 74 and 75 together.

The table below shows the establishment and current strength of the Defence Forces, by service, as at 31st December 2021, the latest date for which such data is available:

Service	Establishment	Current Strength (WTE)
Army	7,520	6,841
Air Corps	886	751
Naval Service	1,094	876
Total	9,500	8,468

The Government remains committed to returning to, and maintaining, the agreed strength of each branch of the Defence Forces and, in that context, a number of initiatives are being implemented to counter current staffing challenges and these will play a role in restoring and

retaining capacity.

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.

*Question No. 75 answered with Question No. 74.*

### Air Corps

76. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence the current total strength of Air Corps personnel; and the breakdown of the number of qualified military pilots, cadet pilots in training, qualified military aircraft maintenance technicians, qualified military avionics technicians and military apprentices in training of both disciplines. [5216/22]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I am advised by the military authorities that the strength of the Air Corps, as at 31st December 2021 (latest date for which such data is available) is 751 wholetime equivalent personnel.

The table below shows the strength by requested stream:

Personnel Stream	Strength as at 31/12/2021
Qualified pilots	89
Cadets currently completing military training*	15
Young officers in pilot training	16
Qualified Military Aircraft Technicians	171
Apprentice Military Aircraft Technicians	67
Direct Entry Military Aircraft Technicians undergoing basic military training	2

\*Cadets are scheduled to commence their Pilot Wings course once they graduate as Officers.

Of the 171 qualified Military Aircraft Technicians, 33 are currently employed in avionics and 138 in maintenance. A Military Aircraft technician is an individual who has qualified from the Air Corps Apprenticeship, or Direct Entrants deemed to have the suitable qualifications, to work on aircraft in the various maintenance roles. The phrase 'aircraft technician' is an umbrella term which covers the broad range of disciplines within the Air Corps across a range of ranks and across a range of disciplines, from avionics technician to aircraft mechanic, from crew leader to aircraft inspector.

As outlined above, there is a strong training pipeline for Military Aircraft Technicians consisting of 67 apprentices. Of these apprentices, 23 are undergoing basic military training along with 2 Direct Entry Aircraft Technicians. The remaining 44 apprentices are undergoing their qualification process and will be streamed into Rotary, Fixed Wing or avionics technician categories during that process.

My focus remains on retaining/restoring all branches of the Defence Forces to their full capacity. 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.

**Naval Service**

77. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence the number of Naval Service operations and patrols which have been cancelled to date in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5217/22]

**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 primary day-to-day tasking of the Naval Service is to provide a fishery protection service in accordance with the State's obligations as a member of the European Union. In terms of fishery protection the Naval Service is tasked with patrolling all Irish waters from the shoreline to the outer limits of the Exclusive Economic Zone. These patrols are carried out on a regular and frequent basis and are directed to all areas of Irish waters as necessary.

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

A total of 10 scheduled Naval Service patrol days have been cancelled to date in 2022. All of the cancelled patrol days are due to members of a ship's crew contacting Covid 19.

Notwithstanding some mechanical and staffing issues being experienced, the Naval Service continues to carry out the roles assigned by Government, including fishery protection and maritime security operations.

**Defence Forces**

78. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence the number of women in the Defence Forces by rank; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5218/22]

79. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence the current number of women in the Defence Forces who are currently serving overseas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5219/22]

80. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence the number of women members of the Defence Forces who have left in the past year by month and to date in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5220/22]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 78, 79 and 80 together.

The number of women who discharged from the Permanent Defence Force in 2021, by month, up to 31st December 2021 (the latest date for which such information is available) is as follows:

Month	Departures
January	3
February	2
March	2
April	3
May	6
June	4
July	6

August	2
September	6
October	8
November	2
December	3
Total	47

Personnel discharge for a variety of reasons including on age grounds, at end of contract and voluntary discharges. Discharges also include trainees who exited prior to completion of their initial training.

The table below shows the number of women, by rank, in the Permanent Defence Force, as of 31st December 2021. Of these 36 (8 Officers, 28 Other Ranks) were serving overseas.

Rank	Strength (WTE)
Lieutenant General	0
Major General	0
Brigadier General	1
Colonel	1
Lieutenant Colonel	2
Commandant	62
Captain	50
Lieutenant	49
Total Officers	165
Sergeant Major	0
Battalion Quartermaster Sergeant	0
Company Sergeant	5
Company Quartermaster Sergeant	9
Sergeant	67
Corporal	101
Private	242
Cadets	9
Total Other Ranks	433

It is Government policy to increase female participation rates at all levels of the Defence Forces, in order to enhance capability and to better reflect the society from which the Defence Forces are drawn and serve, and a number of initiatives have been, and continue to be, implemented in this regard.

Furthermore, as the Deputy will be aware, an Independent Review Group has been established to examine issues relating to unacceptable behavior in the workplace. Additionally, the Commission on Defence Forces is due to report in the coming weeks and their views will be an important aid to the Independent Review.

### Defence Forces

81. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Defence the terms of reference of the independent review into dignity and equality issues in the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5224/22]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** As the Deputy will be aware, following Cabinet approval, an Independent Review Group has been established, under the Chair of Ms. Justice Bronagh O’Hanlon, to examine issues relating to sexual misconduct, bullying, harassment and discrimination in the Defence Forces.

The overall aims of the Independent Review are to:

- Advise on whether the current legislative frameworks, policies, procedures and practices for addressing incidents of unacceptable behaviour in the workplace are effective.
- Independently assess whether the pervading culture in the workplace is fully aligned with the principles of dignity, equality, mutual respect, and duty of care for every member of the Defence Forces.
- Provide recommendations and guidance 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.

This Independent Review is seen as a critical and vital next step to ensure that the workplace for serving members of the Defence Forces is safe, where there is zero tolerance of unacceptable behaviour and where we learn from historical experiences.

My Department and I have engaged extensively in recent months on the Terms of Reference, with the Women of Honour Group and with other stakeholders, including both serving and former members of the Defence Forces, the Representative Associations, PDFORRA, RACO and RDFRA and with a second group representing former members. The Terms of Reference, approved by Cabinet last week, were published yesterday on Gov.ie [www.gov.ie/en/publication/d978a-dignity-and-equality-in-the-workplace-the-defence-forces-an-independent-review/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d978a-dignity-and-equality-in-the-workplace-the-defence-forces-an-independent-review/)

Current and former members of the Defence Forces have welcomed the Review and whilst I acknowledge the disappointment expressed by the Women of Honour group who have been seeking a Tribunal of Inquiry, I am strongly aware of the need for immediacy of action to ensure the safety of serving Defence Forces members.

I want to be clear that this does not preclude Government from considering further bodies of work that may be necessary. The Review Group have been specifically asked to advise on whether further work is required to examine issues of an historical nature and to make any recommendations regarding how this might be pursued.

The Review Group will provide me with an interim report after six months. A final report is expected within 9 months. I will bring the Final Review Report to Government, who may consider any further bodies of work that might be necessary, taking into account the findings of the Independent Review Group. Thereafter, I intend to make the Final Review Report public.

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

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2022-02-02\_pq-81-2-2-22\_en.pdf">Review</a>]

82. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Defence if he will review correspondence and address the concerns raised by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5274/22]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** 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 and the pension 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, currently at age 66.

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.

The person in question (details supplied) qualified for maximum pension and retirement benefits immediately upon his retirement in 2013 at age 52, having completed more than 31 years service. The integration process will only begin when his state pension becomes payable, currently at age 66.

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 will happen under the Defence Forces pension schemes by virtue of the loss of the additional increment on qualification for the State Pension.

It might be noted that the method of integration for ‘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

## **Education Schemes**

83. **Deputy Patrick O’Donovan** asked the Minister for Education when she will provide guidance on the expected broadening of DEIS status for primary schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5203/22]

**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 DEIS ID 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 the DEIS programme and all schools will be considered under the refined DEIS model when it is applied.

In advance of the implementation of the refined DEIS identification model, there will be further engagement with relevant stakeholders. The purpose is to ensure that, as far as possible, the refined DEIS identification model can provide an objective and independent means of identifying schools serving high concentrations of pupils at risk of educational disadvantage and also to ensure there is a full understanding of the refined model and its potential application.

### **Education Schemes**

84. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Education when work on the DEIS refined resource allocation model will be complete and consideration given to extending the DEIS programme to further schools. [5205/22]

**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.

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In advance of the implementation of the refined DEIS identification model, there will be further engagement with relevant stakeholders. The purpose is to ensure that, as far as possible, the refined DEIS identification model can provide an objective and independent means of identifying schools serving high concentrations of pupils at risk of educational disadvantage and also to ensure there is a full understanding of the refined model and its potential application.

### **School Accommodation**

85. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education if an additional accommodation scheme application by a school (details supplied) will be reviewed; the status of the application; if her attention has been drawn to the fact that the application is linked to another major project for the school that has already received approval; if approval for the second application will be expedited given the delay being caused to works; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5250/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm to the Deputy that my Department received an application for capital funding, under the Additional School Accommoda-

tion (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 Education Needs (SEN) accommodation is available to cater for pupils enrolled each year, where the need cannot be met by the school's existing accommodation.

Officials in my Department have had recent engagement with the school authorities and confirmation of the approval of temporary accommodation has issued to the school. In respect of the application for permanent accommodation, formal confirmation of the decision on the application will issue shortly to the school authority.

### **State Examinations**

86. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education if she will address a matter (details supplied) regarding leaving certificate options; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5259/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** In recent weeks, I have attended a meeting with the Advisory Group on State Examinations, which has representatives of students, parents, teachers, school managerial bodies, the further and higher education sector, and the State Examinations Commission. Following on from this meeting, I met with the members of the advisory group on a bilateral basis and also had further engagement with each of them thereafter. I have listened carefully to what each of these stakeholders has had to say and examined each of their points. A number of other proposals submitted to my Department were also considered.

Following consideration of this matter by Government yesterday, I announced the decision: to operate an examinations approach for Leaving Certificate in 2022, with significant further adjustments to the examinations; and to provide students with a commitment that the overall results of Leaving Certificate 2022 will not be lower than in 2021. As the Deputy may be aware, it would not have been possible to run Accredited Grades in the same manner as last year, as Junior Cycle data was unavailable for 25% of our students.

The further extensive changes I have announced to the examination papers, over and above those announced in August 2021, mean that candidates: have greater choice in the papers; have less questions to answer; and still have the same amount of time as in a normal year to complete the examination. For example, in mathematics on each paper, instead of having to answer all ten questions, candidates will only have to answer six.

This is in addition to previously announced changes, such as the running of the Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations and Music Practical over the first week of the Easter Break.

Timeframes for certain assessment elements of the Leaving Certificate Applied examinations have also been pushed out. Schools were also reminded of the flexibilities regarding the dates for completion and authentication of examination Coursework.

I have also confirmed that Junior Cycle examinations will take place this summer. Adjustments to the assessment arrangements for Junior Cycle were published in August 2021 and provide for more teaching time in schools. They include a reduction in the number of Classroom Based Assessments to be completed, the removal of the requirement to complete Assessment Tasks, and adjustments to the requirements in coursework and practical performance tests.

I believe that the decision announced will provide Leaving Certificate students of 2022 with an opportunity for their learning and attainment at the end of their post-primary education to be

assessed, and will enable them to progress to the next stage of their lives. It also provides the certainty and clarity in this matter that had been requested by schools and parents.

### **Home Schooling**

87. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education the status of an application by a person (details supplied) for home tuition; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5260/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The purpose of the Home Tuition Grant Scheme is to provide funding towards the provision of a compensatory educational service for children who, for a number of specific reasons, are unable to attend school.

Over 1,400 families were supported by Home Tuition grant funding under the various Department Scheme in the 2020/21 school year with an allocation of approximately €17million.

The criteria for eligibility of the scheme are;

- Students enrolled in a school, with a significant medical condition which has, and is likely to cause, major disruption to their attendance at school on a continuing basis.
- Children with special educational needs seeking an educational placement
- For early educational intervention for children with autism.

Home tuition is not an alternative to a school placement and is provided in very limited and specific circumstances. By its nature, it is intended to be a short term intervention.

Under the Home Tuition Scheme all references to “schools” or “school placements” refer to State schools which are recognised under Section 10 (3) of the Education Act 1998.

This requirement is set out in Section 9 of the Home Tuition Circular 0038/2021 which is available at [www.gov.ie/en/service/d15f58-home-tuition/](http://www.gov.ie/en/service/d15f58-home-tuition/)

As the child referred to by the Deputy is not enrolled in a state school, i.e. a school recognised under Section 10 (3) of the Education Act 1998, the application is not eligible to be considered under terms of the Home Tuition Grant Scheme.

### **School Transport**

88. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education if she will assist in the case of a child (details supplied) to assist with transport to the nearest school with a suitable available place for their needs as supported by a clinical psychologist and the school principal. [5273/22]

**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.

Under the terms of the Department’s School Transport Scheme for Children with Special

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

Children who are not eligible for school transport will be considered for spare seats that may exist after eligible children have been facilitated; such seats are referred to as concessionary seats.

Because of the nature of concessionary transport for non-eligible children and the priority of providing places for eligible children, there may be an excess of demand over supply for concessionary places, in these cases Bus Éireann will allocate tickets for spare seats using a random selection process.

The NCSE have confirmed that the school the parents have enrolled their child in is not the closest school/class resourced to meet special educational needs of the pupil.

While the pupil in question is not eligible for transport under the School Transport Scheme for Children with Special Educational Needs for the above reason, an application for SEN concessionary transport was received in the School Transport Section for the 2021/22 school year on behalf of this pupil.

Concessionary transport may vary from year to year and cannot be guaranteed for the duration of a child's primary school education cycle. Where the number of applications for transport on a concessionary basis exceeds the number of seats available, Bus Éireann determines the allocation of the tickets and refunds payments made on behalf of those concessionary applicants for whom no seats remain.

Bus Éireann, which operates school transport on behalf of the Department, has advised that there is no available service to cater for this SEN concessionary pupil under the terms of the scheme.

### **Educational Disadvantage**

89. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Education the progress that has been made regarding a new model to identify concentrated levels of disadvantage in schools; if a consultation has taken place with relevant stakeholders; if so, if she will outline the components of this model; when additional schools will be considered for DEIS status; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5279/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) is the main policy instrument of the Department of Education to tackle educational disadvantage.

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.

During the process to refine the DEIS identification model, and as is general practice in the Department, my Department has consulted with education partners (school management and national parent representative bodies and unions) on the technical aspects of the refinement of the DEIS identification model.

In advance of the implementation of the refined DEIS identification model, there will be further engagement with relevant stakeholders. The purpose is to ensure that, as far as possible, the refined DEIS identification model can provide an objective and independent means of identifying schools serving high concentrations of pupils at risk of educational disadvantage and also to ensure there is a full understanding of the refined model and its potential application.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

90. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education if the requirement for children to wear masks in school can be lifted in the immediate future in view of the improved public health situation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5293/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department has always been guided by public health advice in relation to appropriate COVID-19 infection prevention and control measures in place in schools. Current public health advice makes it a requirement for a face mask to be worn by teachers, staff in schools, students attending post-primary school, and students from third class upwards in primary school. These measures protect students/pupils, their parents and school staff and are very effective when adhered to.

Public Health continue to advise that the two most important actions to prevent the introduction and spread of Covid-19 (and other respiratory viruses), is by ensuring no-one with new onset symptoms attend school, and that all recommended infection prevention and control measures are in place in line with school Covid-19 response plans.

Public Health have also confirmed that there is no change to infection prevention and control measures in place in schools at this time, but that they will be reviewed by mid-term in February. The infection prevention and control measures in place in schools have worked very effectively to prevent and control Covid-19 in schools.

### **School Staff**

91. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education if she will review correspondence (details supplied); and if she will address these concerns and provide an update on this matter. [5297/22]

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

The majority of primary and voluntary secondary schools receive assistance to provide for secretarial, caretaking and cleaning services under grant schemes. Where a school employs a staff member to support those functions those staff are employees of individual schools and responsibility for terms of employment rests with the school.

The Department with school management bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on a claim on terms and conditions for grant-funded school secretaries and caretakers. On the 27th of October 2020, under the auspices of the WRC, an understanding was agreed on a pathway to progress the issues. Several key strands were identified, and a phased approach is being taken to the development of proposals.

Following intensive discussions at the WRC on 13th September 2021, there was significant progress in this dispute. Subject to agreement on all elements of the claim, the Department has offered to move School Secretaries' pay rates to a scale which is aligned with the Clerical Officer Grade III pay scale on a pro rata basis according to a secretary's current working pattern. The Department has also offered to improve the conditions for School Secretaries with regard to sick leave, annual leave and maternity provisions for this cohort of staff.

Further dialogue has taken place between the parties on these issues since 13 September with the aim of reaching an overall agreement. The talks continue, most recently at a meeting at the WRC on 26 January; the parties are to meet again next month, following reflection on the matters discussed at that meeting.

I welcome the continued engagement between the parties and I encourage all stakeholders to focus on finalising an agreement.

### **School Facilities**

92. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education if a school (details supplied) will be prioritised on the energy retrofit of schools programme. [5304/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department is at the forefront of design with respect to sustainable energy in school buildings and this performance has been recognised at both National and International level with sustainable energy awards for excellence in Design and Specification.

Schools that are designed and built in accordance with the Departments Schools technical guidance documents must achieve an A3 Building Energy Rating and have typically up to 20% higher energy performance and up to 25% carbon performance than required by the current Building Regulations, along with 10% of primary energy provided via photovoltaics and infrastructure provision for electric vehicle charging.

All new technologies and approaches are tested to ensure compatibility with school design and operational requirements. Successful and repeatable results are then incorporated into all new school designs and refurbishments.

My Department's Technical Guidance Documents set the benchmark for sustainable design in school buildings with a clear focus on energy efficiency and they are based on solid energy research projects. The Departments policy is supported by a strong research programme with fifty three research projects at various stages including its joint SEAI partnership energy website project [www.energyineducation.ie](http://www.energyineducation.ie).

My Department and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland are involved in an energy efficient retrofit pathfinder scheme for schools. The outcome of the pathfinder will be to create an accurate and scalable model for energy efficient retrofits of schools across Ireland. A deep energy retrofit programme for schools built prior to 2008 is included in the NDP.

The general principles and approach to school selection include schools meeting Energy

Monitoring and Reporting requirements and demonstrating a strong and holistic commitment to energy management practices through participation in the Energy in Education Programme. The programme selection also seeks to enable various cross sections of school types and sizes, energy consumption profiles and different elements of construction type and heritage/ conservation requirements where specific learnings are being targeted. The pathfinder programme is thus delivered on broad assessment in line with the above considerations and not on an invitation basis.

### **School Accommodation**

93. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the number of children in cold prefabs having to wear extra clothes to keep themselves warm; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5483/22]

**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 following points are noted in this guidance:

- o The guidance provide to all schools advised that “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 in classrooms during periods of colder weather.

- o Similarly ensuring that at the end of the school day each evening, the windows in each room are opened (as wide as is practical and safe, while also considering security issues) for at least 15 minutes to ventilate the room fully will ensure that the classrooms are ventilated from the night before and this does not need to be repeated prior to class in the morning. During this first class of the school day windows should, weather conditions permitting, be partially opened (as per guidance in this document) to keep the room fresh and prevent stuffiness and condensation etc. This is in addition to and complements the end-of-day ventilation described above.

- Achieving fresh air by having a number of windows partially opened as required rather than one window fully open can help to maximise the use of window driven natural ventilation distribution across the room without causing discomfort. In colder weather any local chilling effect can be offset by partially opening the windows nearest to and above the radiators.

- As part of managing comfort levels in classrooms, schools should check that their boilers operation temperatures are set at the recommended manufacturers' guidance levels to maximise the available heat to the school.

- In addition, heating should operate for extended periods during colder weather to counteract, as best as possible, the impact of windows being open (partially when classrooms are in use and fully when not in use) in order to maintain an appropriate balance between ventilation and comfort levels”

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. 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 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](http://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.

### **Schools Building Projects**

94. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education if her Department is still actively considering a site (details supplied) for a new school build; if a decision has been made to look at a different site; if so, when that decision was made; if stakeholders have been notified of this; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5501/22]

95. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education if a master-plan was completed for a site (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5502/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 94 and 95 together.

I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department has initiated a site identification and assessment exercise for a 1,000 pupil post primary school in the area in question and its environs. While a site acquisition process is underway and, given the commercial sensitivities associated with land acquisitions generally, I am not in a position to comment further at this time

A similar exercise was undertaken a number of years ago which proved unsuccessful and the current exercise will establish if the situation has changed in the intervening period.

The master planning process is well advanced. The outcome of this process will determine the next steps to be taken.

*Question No. 95 answered with Question No. 94.*

### **Medical Cards**

96. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if replacement dentures are covered for a person (details supplied) either by way of medical card or by dental benefit given that they have a full medical card; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5188/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Treatment Benefit Scheme provides dental, optical and aural services to insured workers, the self-employed, retired people and their dependant spouse/partner who have the required number of social insurance (PRSI) contributions.

In order to qualify a person needs to have at least 260 PRSI contributions paid at either Class A, E, H, P or S, since first starting work, and also have 39 contributions paid or credited in the relevant contribution year on which the claim is based.

The person concerned does not qualify for treatment benefit under the Department's PRSI scheme. Although he has the required 260 total paid contributions, he does not have the 39 paid or credited contributions in the relevant tax years.

It should be noted that replacement dentures are not covered on the Department's treatment benefit scheme. The scheme provides for a free annual dental examination and an annual scale and polish treatment, subject to a maximum co-payment of €15.

As the person concerned is the holder of a medical card, he may have an entitlement to benefit under the HSE scheme. He should contact his local HSE health office for advice on his entitlement under that scheme.

I hope this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

97. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a social welfare appeal will be decided (details supplied) given the applicant is under severe financial pressure. [5206/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I am advised by the Social Welfare Appeals Office that an Appeals Officer, having fully considered all of the available evidence, decided to disallow the appeal of the person concerned by way of a summary decision. The person concerned was notified of the Appeals Officer's decision on 2 November 2021.

Under social welfare legislation the decision of an Appeals Officer is final and conclusive and may only be reviewed in the light of additional evidence or new facts.

I am advised that the person concerned has submitted additional evidence and that the Appeals Officer has agreed to review the case. The person concerned will be contacted when the review of her appeal has been finalised.

If the person's means are insufficient to meet their needs, it is open to them to apply for supplementary welfare allowance in the interim.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Schemes**

98. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Social Protection the anticipated number of families who will benefit from the extension of the period from thirteen weeks to six months that payment of the domiciliary care allowance can be paid with regard to children in hospital. [5253/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Domiciliary Care Allowance is a monthly payment for parents caring for a child with a severe disability.

The number of children, in respect of whom Domiciliary Care Allowance (DCA) is being paid, who are admitted to hospitals for periods in excess of 13 weeks but under 26 weeks in any given year will vary. However, based on the numbers of such cases advised to DCA section in recent years, it is estimated that the number of families affected by this change will be relatively low, less than 100, but each of these families will benefit from the reassurance of knowing that Domiciliary Care Allowance will remain in payment at a particularly difficult time.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Benefits**

99. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a jobseeker's benefit application by a person (details supplied) will be processed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5376/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The application for the person concerned has been reviewed and they do not qualify for Jobseeker's Benefit for the Self Employed. This payment is only available for persons whose self employment has ceased completely.

The person concerned has been considered for Jobseeker's Allowance (means tested assessment) and the Deciding Officer has awarded Jobseekers Allowance in this instance. A Decision Letter has been issued to the person concerned on 31/01/2022.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment**

100. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Social Protection if more time can be given to allow a requested employer letter to be submitted in support of a pandemic unemploy-

ment payment application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5379/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) was introduced as one of a number of measures to provide income support to those who had lost their employment as a result of Covid. Other supports include the Covid-19 Enhanced Illness Benefit payment, which is available to persons who have diagnosed with Covid-19 or instructed by a Doctor or the HSE to self-isolate.

The Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment scheme closed to new applications on 8 July 2021.

The scheme re-opened from 7 December 2021 to support persons who had lost their income from employment on or after that date as a result of the decision to temporarily impose restrictions on the trading of certain business sectors to slow the spread of Covid-19.

These restrictions had a particular impact on sectors such as hospitality, the night-time economy, and the arts and entertainment sectors.

The re-opening of the scheme was specifically targeted at persons who were directly affected by the trading restrictions introduced on 7 December 2021. It did not involve a general re-opening of the scheme.

The person concerned was in receipt of Enhanced Illness Benefit from 23 November to 28 December 2021. They also applied for the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment indicating that they had last worked on 3 December 2021. The person's employer is based in the healthcare sector. A formal decision has not yet been made on the person's entitlement to the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment.

My Department has been in contact with the person concerned to clarify the background to their loss of employment and the date to which they were last paid by their employer. Payroll submissions from their employer to the Revenue Commissioners include payments in December 2021 and January 2022. Based on information supplied by the person concerned, it appears that the person was unable to return to employment as their employer had allocated their work to other employees. Further information has been sought from the person concerned at which time a formal decision will be made. The information can be supplied by email and no decision will be made while a response is outstanding. In the event that the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment is not payable, the person may have an entitlement to Jobseeker's Benefit.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Payments**

101. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she has examined the possibility of index linking social welfare payments; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5425/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** In 2019, my Department undertook a consultation process with a number of interested stakeholders to hear their views on possible approaches to indexation of pensions and social welfare rates more generally. This process also included discussion with representatives of the community and voluntary sector at the Pre-Budget Forum in July 2019 as well as at bilateral meetings with stakeholders.

The outcome of these discussions was considered, and in consultation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, the Department has developed proposals for setting a formal benchmark for State Pension Contributory payments and the indexation of future changes in pension rates of payment.

The approach developed, known as the “smoothed earnings” approach, aims to ensure that over the long-term, the relative value of welfare payments compared to market earnings would be maintained and that, in the short-term, the real value, or purchasing power, of these payments would be protected.

The Pensions Commission report, which is currently being considered, also examined the issue of benchmarking pension rates and has endorsed the “smoothed earnings” approach.

The Department is currently considering the recommendations of the Pensions Commission and I intend to bring proposals to Government by the end of March 2022 in relation to the recommendations.

### **Social Welfare Benefits**

102. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will consider free travel for all means tested social welfare recipients given the rising costs of living; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5426/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The free travel scheme provides free travel on the main public and private transport services for those eligible under the scheme. These include road, rail and ferry services provided by companies such as Bus Átha Cliath, Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann, as well as Luas and services provided by over 80 private transport operators. There are currently approximately 1,022,000 customers with direct eligibility. The estimated expenditure on free travel in 2022 is €95 million.

The objective of the free travel scheme is to ensure older people and people with disabilities remain active within their community. Extending the eligibility of the free travel scheme to the cohort of people the Deputy has suggested would change this objective, and radically change the nature of the scheme. Any such scheme would also require a more significant operation than that which currently underpins the administration of my Department’s free travel scheme, as it would have to grant and withdraw potentially huge number of passes each year given that many people may only be in receipt of a means tested payment from my Department for a short period. Any such scheme may also prove to be extremely costly.

Under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme (SWA) the Department of Social Protection may award a travel supplement in any case where the circumstances of the case so warrant. The supplement is intended to assist with ongoing or recurring travel costs that cannot be met from the person’s own resources and are deemed to be necessary. Every decision is based on consideration of the circumstances of the case, taking account of the nature and extent of the need and of the resources of the person concerned.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Payments**

103. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of social welfare payments that were suspended, cancelled or not awarded to lone parents due to failure

to provide proof of efforts to seek maintenance for 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021. [5506/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** In light of the complexities in these cases, suspending, cancelling or not awarding lone parents applications for this reason referred to is rare at application stage in the Department.

However, my Department follows up with liable relatives for appropriate contributions towards the cost of the One Parent Family Payment. During 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021- 1,039, 1,474, 1,075, and 1,440 liable relative arrangements respectively were made whereby payments or additional payments were made to the lone parent recipient averaging €46, €46, €49 and €49 per week respectively. In addition for each year 65, 95, 49, and 62 liable relatives began paying the Department an average of €60, €63, €75 and €59 per week.

The Department secured savings of €3.6, €4.98, €3.04 and €3.5 million as a result of this work over the years 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021 respectively.

I trust this answers the Deputy's question but if he has a specific case my officials are will be happy to engage with the Deputy in this matter.

### **Domestic Violence**

104. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when the review by Tusla of the provision of accommodation for victims of domestic violence will be published; the reason that it has not yet been published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5226/22]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** Tusla's Review of the Provision of Accommodation for Victims of Domestic Violence assesses the current and requisite distribution of safe emergency accommodation. It has examined the current level of refuge provision, evidence of demand for services and unmet need, and analysis of proximity to refuge by local communities.

The Review has been completed and is expected to publish the Review in the coming weeks. The timing of publication is being considered with the Department of Justice and in conjunction with the forthcoming Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence.

The Government has agreed that the Department of Justice will be the lead Department with responsibility for responding to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV). I have recently met with the Taoiseach and the Minister for Justice to discuss this integrated and dedicated response to DSGBV and to ensure prompt advancement of actions to address this issue.

### **Child and Family Agency**

105. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when the Tusla accommodation review will be published. [5227/22]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** Tusla's Review of the Provision of Accommodation for Victims of Domestic Violence assesses the current and requisite distribution of safe emergency accommodation. It has examined the current level of refuge provision, evidence of demand for services and unmet need, and analysis of proximity to refuge by local communities.

The Review has been completed and is expected to publish the Review in the coming weeks. The timing of publication is being considered with the Department of Justice and in conjunction with the forthcoming Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence.

The Government has agreed that the Department of Justice will be the lead Department with responsibility for responding to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV). I have recently met with the Taoiseach and the Minister for Justice to discuss this integrated and dedicated response to DSGBV and to ensure prompt advancement of actions to address this issue.

### **Childcare Services**

106. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if the Childminding Action Plan is on target; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5324/22]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028, which I published in April 2021, sets out a phased, incremental approach to extending supports and regulation to all non-relative childminders. It aims to improve access to high quality and affordable early learning and care and school-age childcare through childminding.

During Phase 1 of the Plan, which began in 2021 and is expected to last 2-3 years, childminding-specific regulations will be developed that are proportionate and appropriate to childminders, as will childminder-specific training. In addition, primary legislation will be amended, and there will be further engagement and consultation with childminders.

The Steering Group met for the first time on 14 September 2021, and met again on 1 December. Its role is to drive, oversee and monitor implementation. The Steering Group will be supported by four Advisory Groups in relation to: Stakeholder Engagement, Consultation and Communications; Training and Support; Funding and Financial Supports, and Regulation and Inspection. The first two Advisory Groups have already commenced their work. The third and fourth Advisory Groups will be established in the coming months.

Extensive consultation with parents, childminders and representative bodies took place throughout the development of the Plan and continues in the implementation phase that has now begun. Representative bodies and childminders are members of the Steering and Advisory Groups. Ongoing consultation will be critical to effective implementation, and work is underway to develop a Stakeholder Engagement, Consultation and Communications strategy.

Phase 2 will be a transition phase lasting 3-5 years, which will see new regulations coming into force, access opened to the National Childcare Scheme, transitional training requirements, and expansion of supports.

Phase 3 will involve full implementation, with the end of transitional arrangements, and childminders regulated and able to access multiple supports.

To support implementation of the National Action Plan, a National Childminding Coordinator has been appointed, as well as a City/County Childcare Committee Lead for Childminding and six regional Childminding Development Officers within the City/County Childcare Committees. Six additional Childminding Development Officers will be appointed by City/County Childcare Committees shortly.

## Legislative Measures

107. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when he will publish the certain institutional burials (authorised interventions) Bill for second stage. [5325/22]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I am acutely conscious of the urgent need to pass legislation in order to allow the excavation to begin at the site of the former Mother and Baby Home in Tuam.

The General Scheme of a Certain Institutional Burials (Authorised Interventions) Bill was developed to provide the required legal basis for intervention at the Tuam site and at other locations should similar circumstances come to light. As the Deputy is aware, the Bill underwent Pre-Legislative Scrutiny in the first half of 2021 and the Joint Oireachtas Committee published its report in July. I have carefully considered the recommendations from that process to take account of issues raised by the Committee, survivors, and family members. The Bill is now close to completion and I intend to publish it in the coming weeks and move it through the Houses of Oireachtas as quickly as possible.

## Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

108. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will consider publishing the collaborative forum report given that the Birth Information and Tracing Bill 2022 has been published; if he will engage with this group as his Department works through the certain institutions (authorised interventions) Bill and restorative recognition scheme for former residents of mother and baby homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5326/22]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I am committed to ongoing engagement with survivors and their advocates in the context of implementing the wide-ranging actions approved by Government in responding to the findings of the Commission. These actions, which take account of the Collaborative Forum’s recommendations, are intended to respond to the priority needs and concerns of former residents and their families.

I recognise that many survivors want to contribute to the development of solutions to the issues of concern to them and their families. I have personally engaged with survivors and advocacy groups, including the Collaborative Forum, since my appointment and I will continue to engage with those centrally involved with these matters.

As outlined in the published *Action Plan for Survivors and Former Residents of Mother and Baby and County Home Institutions*, we are transitioning towards new enhanced arrangements to support inclusive and sustainable stakeholder engagement on a larger scale. This development is essential in facilitating a survivor-centred approach to the important work being advanced across Government. I will be bringing detailed proposals in this regard to Government early this year. As part of this process, I intend to meet with the Forum again and finalise arrangements for publication of the Forum’s report.

Collaborative Forum members have actively contributed to the pre-legislative scrutiny of the Certain Institutional Burials (Authorised Interventions) Bill and the Birth Information and Tracing Bill 2022. In addition, Forum members had a dedicated session as part of the consultations on the Payment Scheme. The Forum is also represented on the steering group for the

NUIG research project examining language, terminology and representation.

Members of the Forum, past and present, continue to receive updates on Mother and Baby and County Home developments through the mailing list maintained by my Department. These communications will be supplemented with the introduction of quarterly updates on the implementation of the Action Plan.

### **Protected Disclosures**

109. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of protected disclosures made to him in relation to his Department and all bodies under its remit by year and body since 2014 to date in 2022; the date on which each was received; the date on which it was determined that each protected disclosure was upheld or not upheld; the number subject to ongoing investigation and the date on which each of these was received; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5503/22]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** My Department has received 3 Protected Disclosures since 2014. All 3 related to Tusla, the Child and Family Agency.

The 1st of these Protected Disclosures was received in December 2016. The details of this disclosure were referred to Tusla for examination and a final report is awaited.

The Department received a second Protected Disclosure in February 2017. The Department responded to the disclosure and advised that further engagement with the Department is available if required. No further correspondence was received.

The most recent Protected Disclosure was made to the Department in February 2019. This case was closed in June 2019.

Insofar as the ongoing investigation relates to Tusla, I have referred the question to Tusla for direct response to the Deputy.

### **Institutes of Technology**

110. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the status of the bundle II public-private partnership building programmes promised to Waterford Institute of Technology and Carlow campuses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5288/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** As the Deputy will be aware the new Engineering, Computing and General Teaching which is planned for Waterford Institute of Technology and the new Science and Health Building planned for Institute of Technology Carlow are progressing as part of bundle II of the Higher Education PPP (HEPPP) Programme

HE PPP Bundle II projects are currently at procurement stage, with construction anticipated to commence in Q1 2023. The IT Carlow Science and Health Building is due to be completed in Q1 2025 and the Waterford IT Engineering, Computing and General Teaching building is due to be completed in Q2 2025.

## **Institutes of Technology**

111. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans to enlarge the Waterford Institute of Technology campus area through land acquisition; the existing land ownership holding presently available to WIT area in acres by combining its assets on the Cork Road and Carraiganore and any other areas in its ownership; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5289/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I have been clear in my commitment to expanding the imprint of higher education across the south east region. This includes achieving a larger footprint for higher education in Waterford - a city which is targeted for a compact and sustainable population growth of 50% under Project Ireland 2040.

Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) has been undertaking an appraisal process, in accordance with the requirements of the Public Spending Code, to examine options for expanded provision. This analysis takes account of factors such as the planned population growth in Waterford, regional and national skills needs, and existing campus capacity. A Preliminary Business Case is scheduled to be received from WIT by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) this week.

Detail of the assets in the ownership of WIT is a matter for WIT authorities in the first instance. However, the Preliminary Business Case will take account of land available to WIT in appraising the options for expansion.

## **Institutes of Technology**

112. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the budget parameters his Department envisages providing for new teaching space at Waterford Institute of Technology; the timeframe under consideration to disburse such funds excluding the long-promised engineering building PPP; the routes available for the college or the new Technological University of the South East to borrow money to support new capital and resource activity to develop additional teaching space given that he has confirmed there is no opportunity to access European Investment Bank supports unlike the national universities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5290/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** My Department and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) continue to work closely with Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) in relation to options for expanded campus provision and are dedicating significant investment towards technological university (TU) development and progression.

WIT has been undertaking an appraisal process, in accordance with the requirements of the Public Spending Code, to examine options for expanded provision. A Preliminary Business Case is scheduled to be received by the HEA from WIT this week. The level of capital costs of future campus development and timeline for delivery can only be determined following a detailed planning and design process; however, investment is likely to be on a phased basis and situated within the context of a wider investment programme for the TU sector.

My Department is also seeking to progress a sector-wide borrowing framework for TUs in line with the recommendations of the 2019 TURN report. Initial discussions stretching back to 2019 on the development of a TU borrowing framework took place with relevant actors includ-

ing the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. It is now anticipated that any borrowing framework would in the first instance prioritise the provision of purpose built student accommodation in line with commitments in the Government's Housing for All plan.

While at a relatively preliminary stage, proposals are currently being developed with a view to further interactions being conducted with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, as appropriate.

### **Work Permits**

113. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Justice the status of each application for volunteer work permits by persons (details supplied); and the estimated timeframe in each case for when they can expect to receive a decision on the appeal application. [5451/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** All appeals are processed in chronological order, based on date order of receipt. While every effort is made to process appeals as soon as possible, processing times will vary having regard to the volume and complexity of applications, the possible need for my Department's Immigration Service to investigate, inquire into, or seek further information, and the resources available. Therefore, it is not possible to give a definitive date as to when the appeals for the persons referred to by the Deputy will be finalised.

Applicants can e-mail any queries directly to [visamail@justice.ie](mailto:visamail@justice.ie) and updates on visa application decisions can also be found on my Department's Irish Immigration website at: [www.irishimmigration.ie/visa-decisions/](http://www.irishimmigration.ie/visa-decisions/).

Anyone who has been refused a visa or preclearance application and who wishes to make another application at a future point, will have their new application assessed on its own merits taking all relevant information into consideration at that time. Their prior immigration history is a matter of record but does not preclude them from seeking a visa or preclearance in the future.

All visa applicants are advised that the onus is on them to provide as much information in support of their application as they feel is necessary. Guidelines to assist applicants have been published on my Department's website. Applicants that follow these guidelines have an improved prospect of receiving a positive decision at first instance.

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](mailto: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.

### **Prison Service**

114. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice the number of prisoners granted temporary release by gender in each of the years from 2010 to date in tabular form. [5191/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Deputy will note that the number of prisoners granted temporary release decreased significantly from 2016 due to the implementation of the Fines (Payment and Recovery) Act 2014, which came into operation in January 2016.

The Act provides the court with a number of alternatives orders (recovery order, attachment of earnings order, community service order) that it can make before the court considers committing the person to prison for non-payment of the fine.

The information requested by the Deputy is provided in the table below.

**Number of prisoners granted temporary release by gender for the period 2010 to date**

	Female	Male	Total
Year 2022 (up to 28 January)	53	473	526
Year 2021	278	2,215	2,493
Year 2020	343	2,442	2,785
Year 2019	492	3,238	3,730
Year 2018	344	2,650	2,994
Year 2017	716	3,803	4,519
Year 2016	2,132	7,725	9,857
Year 2015	2,401	8,904	11,305
Year 2014	2,313	9,079	11,392
Year 2013	2,092	9,033	11,125
Year 2012	1,806	9,393	11,199
Year 2011	1,474	9,037	10,511
Year 2010	837	6,580	7,417

**Departmental Data**

115. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Justice the details of the trend in applications for visas, naturalisation and so on over the past five years; the trend in staff allocated to the work; the data that is tracked in relation to the build-up in arrears of applications or the duration which it takes to issue applications or to schedule necessary appointments; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5229/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on my Department's immigration service delivery over the last two years. Measures introduced to support public health guidelines have unavoidably led to a reduction in processing capacity across all areas at certain times. My Department constantly manages and reviews the allocation of resources to ensure that they are optimised to meet business requirements and that staff are allocated where they are most needed.

Despite these challenges, in 2021, my Department issued 11,512 citizenship decisions, which is the highest number of decisions made since 2015. My Department is also taking a number of steps to speed up the processing of applications and a number of digitisation measures have also been introduced to increase efficiency in the process, including eTax clearance, eVetting and online payments. The end result of the digitisation process will be to free up more staff to focus on processing applications in a timely and efficient manner, to improve service to our customers and reduce waiting times. Based on these measures, my Department's objective is to achieve an improved timeframe of 6-9 months for decisions on a majority of citizenship applications during 2022.

Since the onset of the pandemic, immigration permissions have been extended nine times and as a result, people who held a valid permission to be in the State in March 2020 are legally

permitted to remain until 31 May 2022.

As part of my Department's ongoing work to meet the current unprecedented demand for first-time registration appointments, on 10 January 2022, a Freephone service (1800 741 741) was introduced for customers. It is currently operating 12 hours a day from Monday to Friday (8am to 8pm) and 8 hours a day on Saturday and Sunday (9am to 5pm). There are between 15 and 20 customer service representatives taking calls and making appointments. All appointments for customers to register their immigration permission are now issued through this service, with operators offering one appointment per call, unless it is for an identifiable family group. Almost 9,000 registration appointments have been booked to date and are scheduled to take place between now and April.

Demand for first-time appointments is tracked by the number of people coming forward to seek appointments, along with information provided to my Department by educational institutions, businesses, Government agencies such as the IDA, and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

The processing of renewals for Dublin based customers takes place fully online since July 2020, and currently takes between 8-10 weeks. In the meantime, customers continue to benefit from the extension of immigration permissions until May.

In 2021, the Registration Office in Burgh Quay processed 66,321 online renewals and 15,125 first time registrations and issued 6,805 re-entry visas.

Visa applications are processed in a number of Visa Offices overseas, in my Department's Visa Office in Dublin, and at Embassies of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, which process certain visa applications under delegated sanction from my Department.

The processing time at each office and location worldwide is determined by a number of factors, such as the volumes and complexity of applications, whether investigation is required or not, individual circumstances, peak application periods, seasonal factors, and the resources available. While every effort is made to process applications as quickly as possible, processing times inevitably vary as a result. Processing times are regularly updated on my Department's website at: [www.irishimmigration.ie/visa-decisions/](http://www.irishimmigration.ie/visa-decisions/).

Further statistical details on applications across a number of immigration-related operational areas are set out in the attached tables, for the Deputy's information.

[[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2022-02-02\\_pq-115-2-2-22\\_en.docx](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2022-02-02_pq-115-2-2-22_en.docx)] Applications

### **Prison Service**

116. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice if female prisoners are now provided with period packs following the Inspector of Prisons 2021 Limerick report that this was not the case contrary to the February 2021 Period Poverty in Ireland report; and the number of packs distributed to prisoners in 2022 in both Limerick and Dóchas. [5230/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I can advise the Deputy that while the Inspector of Prisons Thematic Inspection Report for Limerick Prison did not state that sanitary products were not available for women in prison, it did record some negative experiences by some women in relation to the range of products available in Limerick Prison.

I am advised by the Irish Prison Service that a range of period products are available for the women in Limerick Prison and a monthly provision is provided, on request, from a dedicated female prison officer in the prison reception. I can assure the Deputy that all prisoners in Limerick have access to sufficient supply of these and other products such as toiletries.

I am informed that the procedures for the distribution of period pack to prisoners in the Dóchas Centre have been changed and each woman is now provided with a monthly pack, which can be requested through the prison Red Cross Volunteer Group rather than a staff member.

I am further informed that the average number of women in custody between the Dóchas Centre and the Female wing of Limerick Prison in 2021 was 144 and the average monthly distribution of period packs was 226 between both locations. The figures for January 2022 have not yet been collated but will be forwarded to the Deputy as soon as they are available.

### Prison Service

117. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice the status of the implementation of recommendation 12 of the Covid-19 thematic inspection of Limerick Prison which recommended affording greater privacy to women when contacting their children and family members on the phone. [5232/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I wish to advise the Deputy that privacy is afforded to all prisoners in all prisons for various activities, where appropriate, including the placing of phone calls to family and friends and contact with their children. In addition, there are family rooms available for physical visits in all prison and video phones are available in private areas that are readily available to facilitate these calls.

Limerick Prison has a Tusla approved and award winning visitors area and the Irish Prison Service works closely with care workers, the courts and Tusla to provide access visits where appropriate.

In order to protect the prison population from the risk of Covid-19, a number of infection control measures were introduced throughout 2020 and 2021 and into 2022. Regrettably, this included the suspension of physical visits to prisoners for extended periods of time. However, the Service introduced a new video visit system to ensure that prisoners could continue to have visual contact with their families throughout this time.

In addition, in order to enhance contact with families the Service introduced phones into cells in newer prisons where technically feasible. Owing to the success of this initiative the Service has commenced a project to install telephones into all cells across the prison estate. In-cell phones have been introduced in Castlerea, Cork, Cloverhill and Limerick Prison not including the female wing. The practice currently available in the female wing in Limerick Prison is a telephone is provided in each cell and a line is made available to prisoners on request to facilitate phone calls in the privacy of their cells.

The construction of a new prison facility to provide accommodation for 50 female prisoners in Limerick Prison is advanced and is scheduled to become operational in the third quarter of 2022. The new accommodation will contain a telephone in each cell and the design of the facility is based on the principle of rehabilitation and normalisation recognising the unique requirements of female offenders.

In-cell phones are currently being installed in Midlands Prison and the next phase of this project will see in-cell telephones installed in Wheatfield and Portlaoise Prisons and a procure-

ment process is currently in place to facilitate this process.

The provision of in-cell telephones facilitates outbound calls by prisoners from their cells.

### Prison Service

118. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice the details of LGBT+ awareness training curriculum and materials provided to staff of the Irish Prison Service; the regularity with which such training is delivered; and the number of staff that have undergone this training with specific reference to the prison service policy and training in interacting with transgender prisoners. [5233/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I am advised by the Irish Prison Service that LGBT+ awareness training is provided to Recruit Prison Officers and also forms part of the continuous professional development of staff.

Training is provided by the Prison Service College, by way of awareness-raising from a holistic equality, diversity and inclusion perspective.

The table below provides details of the training to Recruit Prison Officers.

Since recruitment in the Irish Prison Service recommenced in 2017, approximately 700 recruit prison officers have received this training, including 144 in 2021.

Module Title	Duration	Learning Outcomes
Equality, Diversity & Inclusion in Prisons	3 hours	Fulfil their responsibilities outlined in Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and treatment and protect human rights.
Impact of Psychological Trauma on specific people in custody	1 hour	Demonstrate awareness of the impact of trauma on and work more effectively with:- Females in custody- LGBTQI community members in custody- Members of the Irish Traveller and Roma Communities- People in custody who at times use violence to get what they need- People in custody who have committed sexual offences- Younger people in custody (18-25)
Human Rights in the Custodial Environment	3 hours	Respect and Promote the Human Rights of those in their care

As a result of COVID-19 practically all training was suspended with the exception of Recruit Prison Officer training. As the situation improves it is anticipated that this training will recommence as part of the continual professional development programme. The Irish Prison Service has also procured a learning management system which it is envisaged will provide another training avenue to staff in relation to new policies, code of ethics and equality, diversity and inclusion responsibilities through e-learning.

In addition, during early 2021 the Irish Prison Service College worked with the Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) to explore the challenges faced by transgender prisoners

while in custody and how the organisation can address these challenges.

In April 2021 information on appropriate language when interacting with transgender persons was made available to all staff on the Prison Service intranet portal PRISM. The material was highlighted as a feature on a number of occasions during 2021, including during LGBTIQ+ Pride Month in June 2021. This and other material relevant to the LGBTIQ+ community, staff and prisoners, will be made available during 2022.

The Irish Prison Service is drafting a transgender policy which will recognise and address the emerging needs of prisoners in relation to sexual orientation, gender identity and the distinct and intersectional grounds of gender expression and sex characteristics. The Service is also committed to designing and delivering more bespoke training on these matters in the coming months.

### **Prison Service**

119. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Justice the number of prison cells still slopping out by prison in tabular form. [5234/22]

120. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Justice the year in which slopping out was stopped by prison in tabular form. [5235/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 119 and 120 together.

The information requested by the Deputy is provided in the table below.

The Irish Prison Service committed in its strategic plan to the elimination of the practice referred colloquially as ‘slopping out’, through the provision of in cell sanitation in the older parts of the prison estate where that practice remains.

A number of major capital projects have been undertaken over the years with the primary objective of eliminating ‘slopping out’ as well as upgrading the cellular accommodation in those prisons.

A major refurbishment of Mountjoy Prison was completed in 2014 which included the provision of in cell sanitation and upgrade of the cellular accommodation. In 2016 a new purpose designed modern prison opened in Cork replacing the old prison facility. Similarly a major construction project is currently nearing completion at Limerick Prison which will provide a new accommodation block for male and female prisoners, along with relevant rehabilitation and support facilities and will end the practice of slopping out at Limerick Prison. I understand that ‘slopping out’ in Limerick should cease in early Q3 2022. However, this timeframe assumes no further impact by Covid on supply chain or construction staff

Exploratory engineering surveys have been undertaken at E block, Portlaoise Prison to explore the options of providing in-cell sanitation along with other work to upgrade the cellular accommodation having regard to the age and fabric of the building.

I can advise the Deputy that a contract has been awarded for the construction of a sample cell at E block. The outcome of this project and future operational requirements will help inform further action in this regard.

Prison	In cell sanitation was provided fully	Number of cells without in cell sanitation	Number of prisoners without in cell sanitation in their cell
Arbour Hill	1997	None	None
Cork Prison	2016	None	None
Limerick Prison	B block demolished 2019	23	19
Mountjoy Prison	2014	None	None
Portlaoise Prison	D block demolished 2019	Approximately 130 cells in E block	19*

\*A number of cells are used for other purposes, such as workshops, meeting rooms and stores.

E block traditionally has a low level of occupancy as the majority of prisoners at Portlaoise are detained in the modern C block which has in cell sanitation.

*Question No. 120 answered with Question No. 119.*

### An Garda Síochána

121. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Justice the status of the request by this Deputy and the families to establish an independent review of the death of a person (details supplied). [5251/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Firstly, I would like to apologise to the Deputy for the delay in responding to her correspondence. I would like to offer my sincere condolences to the family concerned for the loss of their loved one in such tragic circumstances.

I intend to seek a report from An Garda Síochána on the matter concerned and will reply to the Deputy in due course.

### Immigration Policy

122. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice her plans with regard to the undocumented regularisation scheme to allow for financial hardship exemptions in cases in which applicants are unable to meet the cost of the application fees or in respect of successful applicants for whom additional immigration fees may apply; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5256/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Regularisation of Long Term Undocumented Migrants Scheme opened for applications on 31 January 2022. Applications will be accepted for six months until 31 July 2022, when the scheme will close. The scheme is only open to those who do not have a current permission to reside in the State and will enable eligible applicants to remain and reside in the State and to regularise their residency status.

The fees payable by an applicant are designed to reflect the effort and cost involved in processing applications for the scheme which, given the benefits involved, is quite a detailed process. A fee of €700 will generally apply to family unit applications and children up to 23 years, living with their parent(s), can be included in a family unit application. A fee of €550 will apply to individual applications. There is no provision for the discretionary waiver or reduction

of fees.

Successful applicants to the scheme will be required to register their permission granted and everyone over the age of 18 years will be required to pay a registration fee of €300.

Full details regarding the qualifying criteria, a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document and the required documentation for the scheme is available on my Department's website at: [www.irishimmigration.ie/regularisation-of-long-term-undocumented-migrant-scheme/](http://www.irishimmigration.ie/regularisation-of-long-term-undocumented-migrant-scheme/).

As previously announced, international protection applicants who have an outstanding application for international protection and have been in the asylum process for a minimum of two years will have a separate application process. The International Protection Office of my Department will contact potentially eligible applicants shortly with further details, which will also be made available on the website [www.ipo.gov.ie](http://www.ipo.gov.ie). There will also be a six month application window for this strand of the scheme from the date it is launched. There will be no application or registration fee associated with this strand.

### **An Garda Síochána**

123. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Justice further to Parliamentary Question No. 511 of 25 January 2022, if she will request the authorities of An Garda Síochána to provide information relating to the total budget allocation and total cost of Operation Foray from 2018 to date (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5265/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As outlined to the Deputy in response to Parliamentary Question No. 511 of 25 January 2022, I have been advised by An Garda Síochána that it is not possible to provide the information sought by the Deputy.

As stated, Garda members may be assigned to several investigations at one time and members do not have a system that allows for them to account for man hours devoted to individual investigations/duties that would allow for the compiling of costs by investigation.

As investigations have no defined time frame, due to the nature of the investigative process, it is not possible to provide budget allocations for investigations. This is distinct to crime prevention initiatives (such as Operation Thor or Operation Citizen) which have defined parameters, including start and end dates, that allow for indicative budgetary information to be provided.

The Garda authorities have advised me that, therefore, it is not possible to provide costs associated with any investigation, and not solely the investigation referred to by the Deputy.

### **Antisocial Behaviour**

124. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Justice the measures being taken to combat antisocial behaviour. [5479/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Government is committed to tackling anti-social behaviour (ASB) and ensuring that people both feel safe and are safe in their communities.

In line with a commitment in the Programme for Government, I have established an Expert Forum on Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB). The Forum is examining a broad range of issues with a

focus on developing measures which will counteract the negative impact of ASB on community morale and quality of life. This has included two subgroups established to consider the specific issues of knife crime and the misuse of scramblers and quadbikes. Other subgroups may be established to tackle additional specific issues as required.

Arising from the work of the subgroup on the misuse of scramblers and quadbikes, funding of almost €200,000 is being provided to eight community-based projects to work with young people involved in the anti-social use of scramblers and quad bikes and related crime. My Department welcomes additional applications from other YDPs and is working with a number to support them in developing additional local scrambler initiatives.

The knife crime subgroup is assessing available evidence to inform policy on knife crime, with particular reference to effectiveness of proposals, to inform both legislation and community safety policies, programmes and practices. The work of this subgroup is ongoing and is expected to conclude in the coming months.

Minister McEntee and I also published the Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027 last year, which provides a developmental framework to support children and young people subject to multiple disadvantage and guide them away from involvement in anti-social or criminal behaviours.

The immediate priority within the Strategy is to enhance engagement with children and young people who are most at risk of involvement in criminal activity, principally by strengthening the services available through the existing network of 105 YDPs. In Budget 2022, an additional €6.7 million was provided to kick-start this process.

The new Policing, Security and Community Safety Bill will provide for a key principle from the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland - that preventing crime and harm and making our communities safer does not rest with An Garda Síochána alone. The Bill will help to achieve this by establishing innovative Local Community Safety Partnerships (LCSPs). The Partnerships will develop local safety plans, tailored to the priorities and needs identified by communities themselves, which are likely to include measures to address issues such as ASB.

LCSPs will replace and build upon the existing Joint Policing Committees (JPCs). Membership of the Partnerships will be broader than that of the existing JPCs and will include residents, community representatives (including youth, new communities and voluntary sector representation), business and education sector representation, relevant public services including the HSE, Tusla, An Garda Síochána and local authorities as well as local councillors.

The factors underlying the incidence of crime and ASB are the subject of ongoing academic and expert research and the Department engages with the research community to monitor trends and emerging evidence.

With regard to anti-social behaviour involving children and young people, the Department has a strategic research partnership with the University of Limerick known as the REPPP project (Research Evidence into Policy Programmes and Practice). The REPPP team is involved in the design and implementation of a number of internationally recognised cutting edge initiatives such as the Greentown initiative and the Bail Supervision Scheme.

Although anti-social behaviour is sometimes represented as a youth-related problem, crime figures show that relevant offences occur across a wide age range, underlining the need for a considered and evidence informed approach to developing measures to counter ASB.

In line with a commitment in the Programme for Government, and the Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027, work is underway to examine if further measures to divert young adults away

from criminal or anti-social behaviour can be developed as an alternative to prosecution in appropriate cases. It is intended that issues will be the subject of a public consultation process later this year.

One of the further measures to be examined is that of restorative justice. These practices are used effectively in other jurisdictions to deter young people from crime as well as providing an alternative to criminal prosecution. Although there are certain restorative justice mechanisms available in this jurisdiction, it is expected that the public consultation process will include consideration of the improvement of the mechanisms currently in place and the introduction of new ones.

Justice Plan 2022 will shortly be published by Minister McEntee and I, and will continue the Department's commitment to working with public sector colleagues, NGOs and wider society to deliver communities that are, and feel, safe for all members of society.

It is also worth noting that while my Department is the lead Government Department on policy relating to anti-social behaviour, such behaviour has many underlying factors and measures to combat it fall under a wide variety of State agencies, bodies, offices and Government Departments. It is a key issue being addressed in a range of National Strategies, including the National Drugs and Alcohol Strategy, which is led by the Department of Health, as well as Garda Policing Plans and local authority area plans. The issue will also intersect with the forthcoming Domestic Sexual and Gender Based Violence Strategy.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

125. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health if he will approve the inclusion of contractors contracted directly through the HSE or through a third party in the Covid recognition payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5247/22]

**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, 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**

126. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health if he will approve the inclusion of all staff at HSE Covid-19 PCR testing and vaccination centres in the Covid recognition payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5248/22]

**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, 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.

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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**

127. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health if he will approve the inclusion of all staff in residential, respite services and day services including section 39 staff in the Covid recognition payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5249/22]

**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, 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.

### **Nursing Homes**

128. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health when the plan to exempt rental income from the fair deal nursing home scheme will come into effect; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5277/22]

129. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health when a section (details supplied) of the Housing for All plan will come into effect; the details of this plan; the status of the proposal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5298/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 128 and 129 together.

The Nursing Homes Support Scheme (Amendment) Act 2021, which was signed into law on 22 July 2021, introduced further safeguards into the NHSS to further protect the viability and sustainability of family farms and businesses. It also includes an amendment in relation to applying the 3-year cap to the proceeds of sale of a house while a resident is in long-term care. This addresses the first relevant commitment in the Housing for All Strategy (action 19.7). This removed a disincentive against the sale of properties that might otherwise remain vacant.

As well as introducing the change above, the Department of Health has also agreed to action 19.8 in the Housing for All Strategy to develop a mechanism in relation to the rental of vacant properties “in a way that is targeted, equitable, evidence-based and provides appropriate safeguards for vulnerable older people”. It is important to note that complex policy questions remain in meeting these criteria and there are high risks associated with unintended consequences.

The NHSS is a complex €1.4 billion Scheme that relies on €350m of contributions from over 22,000 residents. It is important to ensure that the costs, benefits, and unintended consequences of any policy changes are fully understood and resolved before they are put in place. There is no existing exemption of rental or similar income from assessment within the Nursing Homes Support Scheme and due care needs to be taken to ensure that any future changes are appropriate; to protect and meet the needs of residents while also making provision for those in need of housing.

The Department of Health, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and other government departments continue to collaborate on this policy, including the identification of the number of houses that may be brought into use and the costs associated with the policy options available to address this action, with a view to introducing legislation as soon as possible once this analysis and policy development is complete.

*Question No. 129 answered with Question No. 128.*

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

130. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health the total budget towards the proposed tax free pandemic recognition payment of €1,000; and the number of eligible frontline workers expected to avail of the payment. [5505/22]

**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.

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.

The cost of providing a recognition payment of €1,000 to all eligible public servants working in the health and ambulance services depends on the number of staff who are eligible for the payment. If there were 100,000 WTE deemed eligible, the estimated cost would be approximately €100 million. This figure of 100,000 WTE represents approximately 75% of the HSE/ Section 38 workforce and would be the minimum expected to be eligible for this recognition payment.

Similarly, the cost of providing an equivalent recognition payment to relevant staff in private sector nursing homes and hospices affected by Covid-19 depends on the number of staff deemed eligible for the payment. The estimated cost set out above does not include the cost in respect of nursing homes and Defence Forces staff. This measure, including costings, will be progressed by the Department of Health. The potential numbers in scope in the private sector nursing homes and hospices are difficult to confirm, however the most recent estimate available points to approximately 36,000 people employed in the private nursing home sector. It is not possible to determine the breakdown of who may or may not be in scope within these private organisations at this point.

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.

## **Dental Services**

131. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if replacement dentures are covered for a person (details supplied) either by way of medical card or by dental benefit given that they have a full medical card; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5189/22]

**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.

### **Health Services**

132. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health when a child (details supplied) will receive an appointment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5223/22]

**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.

### **Medicinal Products**

133. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health the medicines available under the drug payment scheme to treat hyperemesis gravidarum; the medicines available on the medical card to treat same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5225/22]

**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**

134. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health the way persons who received their primary course of the Covid-19 vaccine outside the State but received their booster dose in Ireland can obtain an updated EU Digital COVID Certificate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5240/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Digital COVID Certificates for booster doses of COVID-19 vaccines are now being issued for persons who received their booster dose in Ireland.

Any person who has yet to receive a Digital COVID Certificate for their booster vaccination in Ireland can contact the DCC helpline directly for assistance. A specific data quality procedure is required for the datasets of individuals who received their primary vaccination abroad and subsequent booster in Ireland. Additional documentation may be required to complete the dataset necessary for issuance.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

135. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of a hospital appointment for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5257/22]

**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.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

136. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health if workers in the adult disability services (details supplied) will be included in the once-off, tax free €1,000 bonus payment. [5258/22]

**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, 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.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

137. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) in County Donegal will receive an appointment with a psychologist in Letterkenny University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5261/22]

**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**

138. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if he has plans to set up a long Covid clinic in the South/Southwest Hospital Group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5262/22]

**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.

### **Health Services**

139. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to expand the programmes run by an organisation (details supplied) to assist those living with neurological conditions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5263/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Sláintecare Integration Fund supported Active Neuro - An integrated care approach to delivering health-promoting physical activity programmes for people with neurological conditions in the community. Active Neuro shifts the focus from rehabilitation for new onset or worsening of symptoms, to a health promoting physical activity model for prevention.

Following a successful evaluation, I am pleased to note that Active Neuro has transitioned from the Sláintecare Integration Fund and is now being mainstreamed in NSP 2022.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

140. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health if he will review the case of a person (details supplied); if he will expedite this appointment as a matter of urgency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5264/22]

**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.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

141. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Health if section 39 community health workers will be included in the pandemic bonus payments announced for other healthcare workers given the exceptional work services provided by them (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5267/22]

**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, 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.

### **Vaccination Programme**

142. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the way that a person can apply for an exemption to the European Union booster requirement for travel if they are double vaccinated but have been advised by a consultant not to avail of the booster due to medical reactions

to the previous doses. [5271/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The EU Digital COVID Certificate is not a travel document or a requirement for travel, but a record of a medical event to allow for easier freedom of movement with the European Union.

The travel requirements of each individual EU country are available at the Re-Open EU webpage ([reopen.europa.eu/en](https://reopen.europa.eu/en)) and citizens are advised to familiarise themselves before travelling.

In line with recent changes to EU Digital COVID Certificate Regulations, from 1st February 2022 COVID vaccination certificates for primary vaccination series will no longer be accepted for travel to Ireland if the final dose in the series is more than 270 days before arrival.

An individual wishing to travel to Ireland or within the EU with a Digital COVID Certificate showing the date of final dose more than 270 days prior to arrival may be required to meet additional requirements.

In the case of an individual wishing to travel to Ireland, the individual will be required to present a valid proof of recovery from COVID-19 or a negative PCR test result taken within 72 hours of arrival to Ireland.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

143. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Health the wait time for a person (details supplied) who is waiting over one year for cataract surgery at University Hospital Limerick; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5275/22]

**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.

### **Dental Services**

144. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Health the number of dentists that have left the dental treatment services scheme in County Louth in 2020 and 2021. [5291/22]

**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**

145. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health if the requirement for children to wear masks in school can be lifted in the immediate future in view of the improved public health situation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5294/22]

149. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the position with regard to mask wearing in schools; the relevant statutory instrument signed by him specifically citing this requirement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5300/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 145 and 149 together.

While the majority of public health measures have been lifted, the Government announced that the requirements for mask wearing in all settings where currently regulated for under Statutory Instrument and protective measures in schools and early learning and care facilities should be retained until February 28 based on public health advice. The NPHE will meet again on February 17 and will provide further advice to the Government on this issue.

As the Deputies may be aware, the wearing of masks in schools was never a requirement under Statutory Instrument but is instead based on public health advice and incorporated into education sector policies.

As part of its advice to Government on the easing of public health measures, the NPHE advised that sector specific measures to ensure a safe environment including in relation to the promotion of rapid self-isolation when symptomatic, appropriate use of face masks, physical distancing, hand and respiratory hygiene, ventilation and signage must remain critical components of our collective response to COVID-19. The NPHE also advised that the continued wearing of masks, practicing of physical distancing and avoidance of crowded environments based on individual risk assessment, along with adherence to basic hand and respiratory hygiene will remain important. It will be a matter for sectors, organisations, premises and individuals to determine the most appropriate arrangements once formal requirements have been lifted.

### Legislative Reviews

146. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health if the failure to publish the e-tender for the chair of the review of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 contrary to assurances made to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health on 8 December 2021 was a decision taken by his Department; and if not, if it was an oversight. [5295/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** 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 have stated 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.

As I stated during my appearance before the Joint Committee on Health on 8 December, it was 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 advice I received was that the Department was obliged under procurement rules to tender for the appointment.

Given the expertise required for the position, a small number of candidates, identified as

having suitable experience, were contacted and invited to tender for the role of independent Chair.

Following the tender process, I have now appointed Ms Marie O'Shea B.L. as the independent Chair for the second phase of the review. Ms O'Shea has legal expertise, as well as experience in project management and in healthcare sector research. I look forward to receiving the Chair's final report, incorporating her conclusions and any recommendations, in due course.

### **Legislative Reviews**

147. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the date the research component of the three-year review of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 led by a person (details supplied) was commissioned by his Department. [5296/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** 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 have stated 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.

Research to inform the service user strand is being carried out by Dr Catherine Conlon, Associate Professor, Trinity College, who is progressing a large qualitative study to analyse unplanned pregnancy and abortion care. The study, which was commissioned by the HSE's Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme in September 2019, will generate an in-depth understanding of the experiences of women who have accessed abortion care services since the commencement of the Act. As the Deputy may be aware, I have appointed Ms Marie O'Shea B.L. as the independent Chair to lead the second phase of the review of the operation of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018.

The independent Chair will assess the extent to which the objectives of the Act have been achieved, analysing in that regard the findings of the three strands of information on the effectiveness and operation of the Act. The Chair may also consult with stakeholders to gather information on their experiences as well as their observations on the operation of the legislation and draw on the findings of other relevant peer-reviewed research.

I look forward to receiving the Chair's final report, incorporating her conclusions and any recommendations, in due course.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

148. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the position with regard to mask wearing in churches; if masks are still required; the relevant statutory instrument specifically citing churches as having a requirement for mask wearing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5299/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** While the majority of public health measures have been lifted, the Government announced that the requirements for mask wearing in all settings where currently regulated for under Statutory Instrument should be retained until

February 28 based on public health advice. This includes public transport, taxis and at stations/airports/ports; retail premises and a range of other indoor premises/facilities; and workers in customer facing and food preparation roles in hospitality. The details of the Regulations can be accessed here - [www.gov.ie/en/publication/04388-informal-consolidation-of-covid-19-temporary-restrictions-regulations/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/04388-informal-consolidation-of-covid-19-temporary-restrictions-regulations/).

As the Deputy may be aware, the wearing of masks in churches was never a requirement under Statutory Instrument but was instead public health advice similar to that applying to all indoor public spaces.

As part of its advice to Government on the easing of public health measures, the NPHET advised that sector specific measures to ensure a safe environment including in relation to the promotion of rapid self-isolation when symptomatic, appropriate use of face masks, physical distancing, hand and respiratory hygiene, ventilation and signage must remain critical components of our collective response to COVID-19. The NPHET also advised that the continued wearing of masks, practicing of physical distancing and avoidance of crowded environments based on individual risk assessment, along with adherence to basic hand and respiratory hygiene will remain important. It will be a matter for sectors, organisations, premises and individuals to determine the most appropriate arrangements.

*Question No. 149 answered with Question No. 145.*

### **Medical Cards**

150. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Health if the medical report required for the national driving licence could be included in the medical card scheme. [5303/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Under the terms of the current GMS contract, GPs are required to provide eligible patients with “all proper and necessary treatment of a kind usually undertaken by a general practitioner and not requiring special skill or experience of a degree or kind which general practitioners cannot reasonably be expected to possess.”. Persons who hold a medical card or a GP visit card are not subject to any co-payments or other charges in respect of such services including GP consultations.

The HSE reimburses GPs for services provided under the GMS contract to medical and GP visit card holders. The contract stipulates that fees for medical and GP visit card holders are not paid under the contract to GPs in respect of certain medical certificates which may be required, for example, “under the Social Welfare Acts or for the purposes of insurance or assurance policies or for the issue of driving licences”. Any fees charged by GPs for services provided outside the terms of the GMS contract are a matter of private contract between the GP and their patient.

There are no plans at present to include the completion of medical reports required for driving licence applications as a service to be provided to GMS patients under the GMS or GP Visit Card scheme.

The requirements for the submission of a medical report from a registered medical practitioner with driving licence applications for certain categories of persons, including those aged 70 and over, is governed by the National Driver Licence Service and the Department of Transport.

### **Legislative Reviews**

151. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health when the independent chair of the review of the operation of the Health (Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 is contracted to submit their final report to him for consideration; if amendments to the Act will be a priority issue for the autumn legislative programme; and if the evidence gathered during the review suggests that this is necessary for raising quality standards and providing measurably improved and safer healthcare. [5332/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** 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.

The review of the operation of the Act has now commenced. As part of the first phase of the review, I announced a public consultation ([www.gov.ie/topreview](http://www.gov.ie/topreview)) on the operation of the Act.

As I have stated 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 of the review, a full report with any necessary recommendations, will be submitted to me as Minister for consideration. The timeframe for the review envisages completion by October 2022.

### **Pension Provisions**

152. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health when the increase due to Health Service Executive pensioners, a backdated 2% pay increase due from 1 October 2020 under the 2018 Public Service Agreement will be paid out; the reason for the delay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5333/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy in relation to this matter.

### **Vaccination Programme**

153. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Health when the 12 to 15 years of age cohort who received their second dose over three months will receive their Covid-19 booster vaccination; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5334/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The immunisation programme in Ireland is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The NIAC makes recommendations on vaccination policy to my Department based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international best practices in relation to immunisation. 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.

### **Abortion Services**

154. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 2191 of 27 July 2021, the names of the civil society organisations brought together by an organisation (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5368/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** 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.

Minister Donnelly met with representatives from the following organisations as part of the review of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018. The National Women's Council, Coalition to Repeal the Eight, Abortion Rights Campaign, Irish Family Planning Association, START Doctors, Disabled Women Ireland and a service user.

As I have set out before, 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.

As part of the first phase of the review, I announced a public consultation ([www.gov.ie/topreview](http://www.gov.ie/topreview)) on the operation of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018. The public consultation will provide an opportunity for members of the public, organisations, stakeholders, advocacy groups working in the area, and all other interested parties to inform the review of their views on the operation of the legislation.

Upon completion of the review, a full report with any necessary recommendations, will be submitted to me as Minister for consideration.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

155. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) in County Donegal will receive an appointment for a hip operation in Castlebar Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5370/22]

**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.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

156. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will receive a new cardiology appointment in Letterkenny University Hospital; the reason that their appointment was cancelled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5371/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I fully acknowledge the distress and inconvenience for patients and their families when elective procedures are cancelled, particularly for clinically urgent procedures. While every effort is made to avoid cancellation or postpone-

ment of planned procedures, the HSE has advised that planned procedures and operations can be postponed or cancelled for a variety of reasons including capacity issues due to increased scheduled and unscheduled care demand.

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In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Staff**

157. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Health when a paediatric neurology consultant will be provided for the mid-west; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5377/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

158. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health if his Department has costed the recommendations made in the report of the review of the health services for persons with autism spectrum disorders; if the necessary funding will be made available to implement these recommendations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5452/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As the main element of the Deputy’s question relates to a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly, as soon as possible.

However, it should be noted that, within the Programme for Government, extensive commitments were made to improve the lives of people with disabilities, including those diagnosed with autism.

Significant additional funding to deliver on those commitments has been provided to the HSE through subsequent Budgets in order to fund a comprehensive package of measures. These measures will seek to strengthen and enhance services and supports for people with disabilities and their families, as well as facilitating greater choice, independence and control.

### **Health Services**

159. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the total number of general practitioner referrals to rapid access clinics in each quarter of each of the past five years, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5453/22]

**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.

## Mental Health Services

160. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health his plans to launch a full public inquiry into the treatment of children attending South Kerry Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service which would include a review of the management of the service and the treatment of the whistle-blower; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5462/22]

161. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health his plans for the nationwide audit of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services following the South Kerry CAMHS review; the timeline he is working towards; the person or body he expects will carry out this audit; the terms of reference; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5463/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 160 and 161 together.

The report on Child and Adolescent Mental Health services in South Kerry has been considered locally and nationally by the HSE. It has acknowledged the systemic failures that occurred over a sustained period of time and accepted the recommendations.

There were many contributory factors that led to this catalogue of failures, including an absence of clinical oversight, appropriate governance and management structures.

There are 35 recommendations in total in the report, including an assessment of a reconfiguration of the service. Work is under way to implement the full suite of recommendations as a matter of priority - six have already been implemented and 13 have commenced implementation.

As part of the recommendations a full nationwide audit will be conducted of compliance with existing CAMHS operational guidelines by all CAMHS teams. I have also directed that there be an independently led prescribing audit in each of the CAMHS teams. This will cover community and inpatient teams. There will be a further independent-led audit of case files in north Kerry.

Alongside this, the HSE will commission qualitative research to identify the experiences of children, young people and their families using child and adolescent mental health services nationwide. I have directed that this three-stranded approach be subject to independent oversight.

The HSE has met with 198 of the 240 young people affected, and their families, to discuss the deficits they received in their care and to provide them with key information and referral to any necessary services and supports. This includes counselling supports and appropriate services from within child and adult mental health services. I am in close contact with the chief officer of the area to ensure that any additional supports that are required are provided. The HSE apologised to each individual at these meetings, and subsequently in writing, for any harm caused.

The Government has committed to a non-adversarial scheme for compensation for those children, young people and families affected by the report. I will be working closely with my Department, the HSE and the Attorney General to ensure that the details of such a scheme are confirmed without delay. Many families have already been subjected to harm and considerable distress. I will do my utmost as Minister of State for mental health to reduce the potential for any further upset as this process continues.

The report is shocking and frightening and my thoughts are still very much with the children and young people affected. The systems we have in place must be fit for purpose to support the good work that we know is going on as much as to bring to light and address what harm is

caused. Accountability in this context is vital. I understand that An Garda Síochána in Kerry is in receipt of the detailed and extensive final report, which will now be considered to see if there are grounds to commence a criminal investigation. While it is not appropriate to comment on HR or industrial relations matters relating to any individual, the CEO of the HSE has said that disciplinary action will be taken if appropriate.

*Question No. 161 answered with Question No. 160.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

162. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if general practitioner practice nurses and administrative staff will receive the €1,000 pandemic bonus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5464/22]

**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, 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**

163. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if section 39 workers who continued to provide disability services throughout the pandemic will receive the €1,000 pandemic bonus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5465/22]

**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, the Government announced a once-off public holiday will take place on Friday 18 March 2022.

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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.

### **Disability Services**

164. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if he will review the situation in regard to the review of children's disability network teams which was due to be completed for CHO8 and in particular for areas (details supplied) a number of months ago; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5466/22]

165. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health the number of children who have been transferred from their existing children's disability network team services to a new service following the recent review of services that has taken place in County Louth and east County Meath; if he will seek a copy of the final report and the details of the exchange of clients between services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5467/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 164 and 165 together.

As these are service matters, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

*Question No. 165 answered with Question No. 164.*

### **Hospital Services**

166. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Health the number of operations and treatments that were cancelled in University Hospital Limerick in 2021; when these appointments will be rescheduled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5481/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I fully acknowledge the distress and inconvenience for patients and their families when elective procedures are cancelled, particularly for clinically urgent procedures. While every effort is made to avoid cancellation or postponement of planned procedures, the HSE has advised that planned procedures and operations can be postponed or cancelled for a variety of reasons including capacity issues due to increased scheduled and unscheduled care demand.

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.

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.

### **Hospital Services**

167. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health when the Nenagh General Hospital medical assessment unit will be operating at full capacity each day; the reason that it is prevented from doing so now given that a consultant, registrar and SHO were recently appointed to the unit and this has allowed 12 patients to be seen a day instead of six but that an additional eight patients could be seen each day were the unit operating at capacity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5504/22]

**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.

## **Animal Welfare**

168. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will provide details regarding the equine census currently being conducted by his Department; the obligation on horse owners in respect of this census; if he is satisfied with regard to efforts made by his Department to facilitate engagement in this process by equine owners; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5252/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The undertaking of this first equine census in November 2021 is one of a series of measures I am initiating to support the welfare of horses and other equidae and was one of my Department's listed priorities for 2021.

The new EU Animal Health Law obliges all keepers notify the habitual residence of equines in their care to my Department. The census facilitates keepers complying with this requirement. Census data will provide more accurate information on equines in Ireland, linking each horse to its keeper and providing important information in the event of an equine disease outbreak, in addressing public health concerns and in dealing with lost, straying or stolen horses.

In August 2021, my Department wrote to keepers of all registered equine premises advising them of the census date. While the original intention was for the census to be conducted online only, alternative options were provided following concerns raised by keepers. In November 2021, my Department wrote again to all registered equine keepers advising them that they could complete the census by

- Returning the census form enclosed
- uploading a csv file online where the return involved large numbers of equines
- completing the equine form online

Keepers were also advised that where they had approved a registered agent to act on their behalf, he/she could submit the census data. A guide to completing the form was included and information on the census was posted on the DAFM website. Finally, my Department operated a helpline to assist keepers with queries and completing their census.

Regretfully, technical issues with the online portal meant some keepers had difficulty completing their census online. My Department has continued to work on improving the online user experience and the deadline for the return of census forms was extended in recognition of this issue. Notwithstanding the difficulties experienced by some keepers with their online return, in general there has been very positive engagement with the census.

## **Fur Farming**

169. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of the Animal Health and Welfare and Forestry (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2021; and when the legislation outlawing fur farming will come into effect. [5302/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Report and Final stages of the Animal Health and Welfare and Forestry (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2021 is due to be taken in the Dail today Wednesday 2nd Feb 2022. It must then go through the Seanad. Once the Bill has passed through the Seanad, the prohibition will be commenced as soon as possible after that.

## **Flexible Work Practices**

170. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if there will be additional grants for remote working hubs similar to the connected hubs scheme in 2022; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5278/22]

**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 approximately €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 Scheme.

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.

The development of a national hubs network is a key commitment in Our Rural Future and I am committed to continuing my Department's support for the strategic development of remote working hubs in recognition of the vital role that they can play in our post-Covid recovery.

I am currently reviewing all my Department's funding streams and I will make an announcement shortly on the plans for 2022.